NO MAN’S LAND: REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITIES IN IRAN-IRAQ WAR FICTION

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**Abstract**

This study offers an exploration of masculinity in both Iraqi and Iranian fiction which holds the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) as its major theme. Representations of masculinities in Iran-Iraq War fiction present a deep, and at times, confounding paradox. Whilst this corpus of war fiction at times deeply challenges hegemony and completely reformulates its own definitions of normative codes of manliness, at other times it strictly conforms to chauvinistic and often profoundly oppressive patterns of male behaviour. By relating these works of fiction to their wider social and political context, the aim of this study is to recognise and nuance the relationship between representations of masculinities, and literary depictions of the nation at war.

Theoretically grounded in reformulations of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the study also reflects the work of Joseph Massad, as it attempts to contextualise a body of fiction which employs representations of masculinities as part of wider socio-political allegories. As such this study treats masculinity as a complex phenomenon fraught with ambivalence, operating within particular historical and political contexts, whose subjects are often empowered and oppressed in equal measure. By relating these representations to wider social and political contexts, this study seeks to recognise and nuance the relationship between representations of masculinities and the role which the nation plays in literature, in particularly, when war is the overarching theme. It is within the context of war, when masculinity is often proposed to be at its most simple, that it is proven to be at its most complex as age, class and political affiliations become defining factors in the pursuit of hegemony and therefore what constitutes hegemonic masculinity.

By comparing two national literatures participating in the same conflict, this study reveals the close socio-political dynamic which exists between gender, literature and the so-called constructed “reality” of nation which they purport to represent. Accordingly this study showcases a corpus of work which speaks to a larger literary canon systematically ignored in studies of Persian and Arabic literature. Through in-depth readings of eight works of fiction, published between 1982 and 2003, this study investigates representations of masculinity in both an Iranian and Iraqi context. This thesis is a riposte to common assumptions that literary canon which constitutes Iran-Iraq War is purely associated with state-sponsored narratives, and instead sheds light
on a subtle body of fiction which offers a complex account of war and its effect on society.
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<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ijmes/docs/TransChart.pdf>
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For this reason I dedicate this thesis to Marc for his unconditional love and support, and to him I make this sincere promise— I will never make you read it.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1: OVERVIEW

Representations of masculinities in Iran-Iraq War fiction present a deep and at times confounding paradox. Whilst this corpus of war fiction sometimes deeply challenges male hegemony and completely reformulates its own definitions of normative codes of manliness, at other times it strictly conforms to chauvinistic and often deeply oppressive patterns of male behaviour. Therefore this study offers an exploration of masculinity in both Iraqi and Iranian fiction which holds the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) as its major theme or context of production. By relating these works of fiction to their wider social and political context, the aim of this study is to recognise and nuance the relationship between representations of masculinities and literary depictions of the nation at war. Whilst gender studies in the realm of Middle Eastern studies have focused primarily on the treatment of women in literature, the recognition of male characters as gendered subjects has remained sporadic. Even studies which recognise the close relationship between combat, nationalism and masculinity have tended to ‘imply the existence of an ultimate cultural core which links all Iraqis together, temporal, spatial and social stratification notwithstanding: the eternal Iraqi masculinity.’¹ Like its Iraqi counterparts, this implication all too often finds its way into gender-focussed studies of Iran where ‘masculinity is so standardized that most Iranians do not see it as a category.’² Therefore, this study treats masculinity as a complex phenomenon fraught with ambivalence, operating within particular historical and political contexts, acting on male subjects who are often empowered and oppressed in equal measure.

It is particularly within the context of war, when masculinity is most often proposed to be at its most simple that it proves to be at its most complicated, as age, class and political affiliations become defining factors in the pursuit of hegemony. By comparing two national literatures participating in the same conflict this study reveals the close socio-political dynamic which exists between gender, literature and the so-called constructed “reality” which they purport to represent. In addition to this, the study also

² Shahin Gerami, ‘Mullahs, Martyrs and Men: Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran,’ Men and Masculinities, 5: 3 (2003), 257-274 (p. 258)
showcases a number of texts which speaks to a larger literary canon, revealing a corpus that has been systematically ignored in studies of Persian and Arabic literature. Whilst it is true that the genre has generally been dismissed because of the dominance of state-sponsored narratives emphasising the ideal Islamic or Ba’athist citizen, this study sheds light on a subset of literature which counters state-sponsored narratives through a complex account of war and its effect on society.

1.2: Research Context

Paul Starkey has commented of the relationship between the Iran-Iraq War and Arabic literature that

*It is surprising that this war, responsible for the deaths of more people than any other Middle Eastern conflict in recent times, has inspired almost no [Arabic] literature of significance, at least by comparison with the Arab-Israeli Conflict.*

This observation by Starkey reflects dominant trends in scholarly commentaries about Iran-Iraq War fiction from both Iranian and Iraqi literary perspectives. Therefore, this thesis focuses on one of the least studied areas in Middle Eastern literature - fiction written by Iraqi and Iranian writers in Arabic and Persian about the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The reasons for this lack of scholarly attention are by no means incidental. The quote above highlights one of the integral problems with studying Iran-Iraq War fiction as a canon of literature. Paul Starkey’s assertion concisely summarises dominant perceptions of Iran-Iraq War literature. Firstly that it is generally considered to be devoid of literary value and secondly that it is a mere tool in an already overfilled arsenal of indoctrination utilised by each country’s authoritarian regimes. This is not a baseless accusation given that both regimes’ investment in the genre has played a vital role in creating a solid cultural base for their supporters. Thus the result has been that much of the literature about the Iran-Iraq War came from their own publishing houses with the aim of exporting and saturating the literary market with their specific ideological aims. Whereas in Iraq this production slowed and eventually stopped altogether as the country entered into new conflicts with the United States of America, in the Islamic Republic of Iran life-writing, frontline testimonials, autobiographies, biographies and hagiographies continue to be produced to this day. Whilst any scholar of literature would be hard pressed to claim that all of this literature was of good

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quality, however subjective the term may be, there has been an over-riding tendency to
throw the baby out with the bathwater as interesting, complex and nuanced fiction has
been either tainted by association or been “elevated” to another canon of literature in
order to separate it from the much maligned genre it is partly indebted to. Accordingly, this amounts, in its own way, to a new kind of censorship; as Miriam Cooke has asserted:

Debates about the literary canon have revealed that blanket statements about literary
production enable a kind of knee-jerk censorship—don’t bother to read any European fiction
published between 1939 and 1945 or any Iraqi novels and short stories that came out during
the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. They’re all rubbish. With so much fiction published, the
judicious reader will not open the maligned books. Thus, works important possibly for literary,
and certainly for political reasons, will become effectively censured.

It has not just been authoritarian governments that have attempted to control the
narrative of the Iran-Iraq War via censorship; critics, readers and scholars have also
censored its reception and production by privileging certain themes and narratives
over others. As Roxanne Varzi has observed in her study of the war in post-

revolutionary Iran:

For years there have been two popular public discourses in post-war Iran: the secular
discourse, which is to evade, to ignore, to escape to the Caspian; and then the state’s discourse,
of the strong, mourning women and the heroic martyrs.

For the writers who have had to operate between these two competing discourses,
writing has been a futile act. Whilst the secular middle class literary intelligentsia in
both Iran and Iraq has rejected war narratives on the basis that they are coterminous

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1 For example see Kamran Talattof, The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian
Literature, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 71 in which the reader is asked to consider
Ahmad Mahmud a leftist writer, and to consider Iraq-Iraq War fiction as part of an Islamic literary
narrative (p. 108-134) despite the fact that one of Mahmud’s most critically acclaimed works is about the
Iraq-Iraq War.

2 Miriam Cooke, ‘Arab Women, Arab Wars,’ in Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition,
Identity, and Power, ed. by Fatma Muge Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, (New York: Columbia University
Press, 1994), pp. 144-166 (p. 146)

3 From my personal experience I have found that researching Iran-Iraq war fiction has been a much
frowned upon task. I have received criticism on numerous occasions for my research topic because it
was commonly assumed that I would be supporting government narratives or that I simply didn’t
understand the nature of “good” or “bad” literature and therefore what should or should not be
ignored.

4 Roxanne Varzi, ‘Iran’s Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War,’
Feminist Review, 88 (2008), 86-98 (p. 86)
with government narratives, both governments attempted to appropriate war narratives as a tool for consolidating their respective power bases. This has resulted in a tyranny of representations which subscribe to an approved yet, monolithic account of war. Both regimes attributed a great deal of importance to how the war was presented in popular culture, and was the catalyst for the unifying and homogenising literary accounts of both Iran and Iraq at war produced from state-publishing houses. Indeed, these accounts of war were written in order to underpin specific state-sponsored Iraqi and Iranian identities, and to consolidate their ideological visions for the respective societies they governed. This, however, has been rejected on a multitude of levels by writers, particular veterans-turned-writers, as they attempted to distinguish between the experience of war and its political capital. The result has been that in both countries, where the vast majority of dissent is cultivated through resonant silences, there are a small number of writers who have actively written against the cultivation of narratives by both governments. As a consequence, critical texts generated about the Iran-Iraq War have been subjected to a dual oppression. They have, for the most part, been ignored by the literary community for drawing on a theme which is seen to be part of government rhetoric, and then been drowned out by the cacophony of indoctrinating voices which has tried to control how the texts represent their “realities.” Even following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US forces, the pressure has remained on Iraqi writers to report the present rather than reflect on the past. The experience of both Iranian and Iraqi writers has been characterised by oppression not just from the imposition of state-values but from members of their own literary communities. Even so, there is always hope. As Farzaneh Milani notes of Persian literature:

“That contemporary Iranian writers have all suffered, in differing degrees, from censorship - both external and internal - is irrefutable. But water lilies grow in swamps, and so it is, in a context of tension and watchfulness, that modern Iranian writers flourish.”

It is to these water lilies that this study alludes. The dearth of studies on this research topic does not correspond to the importance of studying a corpus of fiction which depicts the longest incidence of conventional (i.e. inter-state) warfare of the twentieth century. It is particularly representations of masculinities and their relationship with gendered ideas which emerge as a defining preoccupation of this canon of literature.

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In war literature, where combat is defined in masculine terms, the telos of the nation is fundamentally linked to shifting notions of masculinities. As the war constructs and reconstructs society in the most traumatic of ways, it also reveals the fundamental instability of categories of gender in a national context, and it is particularly the meaning of being a man which is constantly being renegotiated in the chaos of war.

The claim that fiction plays a role in communicating normative sexuality continues create controversy. It is important to emphasise that this study considers the texts discussed here to be part of a corpus that stages and represents the dominant ideas circulating in society rather than the actual reality it claims to depict. Taking its cue from Joseph Massad’s seminal work *Desiring Arabs*, in which Massad draws out a European intellectual history which links sexuality and civilization in Arab culture, this study reveals how sexual deviance is used as part of wider social allegory in both Iranian and Iraqi war fiction which denotes a set of discursive practices which comment on the state of the nation by manipulating representations of gender. As a result, masculinity and subsequently male sexuality is delineated through particular codes of normative/deviant practices which infer socio-political allegories regarding the nation through gender. However, in contrast with general assumptions regarding Iranian and Iraqi masculinities which subscribe to the hypothesis that this is embedded through patriarchal codes, the corpus of fiction analysed here infers something radically different. It tells of the decline of the patriarch and the rise of the younger man seeking to escape former, patriarchal allegiance and defend a fraternally conceived nation.

Hence the theoretical framework which is employed throughout the thesis owes much to Carole Pateman’s feminist reading of social contract theory. Her thesis proposes that the overthrow of the father (or monarch) by the sons (civil society) invokes a new social order in which everyone (potentially) has the opportunity to participate in society. However this participation is defined by its masculine fraternal character. In contrast to many theorists who still conceive of Middle Eastern societies to be founded

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* Massad, p. 271
on patriarchal ideals, Pateman moves beyond this conventional model to show how relations between men are the basis of the gendered social order. While it would be difficult to analyse the governments of Iran and Iraq during the period of the Iran-Iraq War in terms of Western conceived contractarian theories, many elements of Pateman’s fraternal masculine order are identified in many of the novels which clearly demonstrate a challenge to the patriarchal status quo. This challenge to traditional patriarchy which resides with the state and/or father (whoever occupies the paternal mantle) conceives a new, normative masculinity derived from fraternal relations. Thus by challenging patriarchal power, the protagonists in the novels comment upon the state of the nation as a masculine order and conceive new paths to hegemony outside of patriarchal dominance.

Alongside an exposition of Pateman’s fraternal contract this thesis builds upon a concept of hegemonic masculinity, a term proposed by R.W Connell, which also discards the constructs of patriarchal dominance for a nuanced approach which views gender regimes relationally. Various regimes of masculine power can rise, fall or maintain their authority through representations of hegemonic masculinities. This combination of both the fraternal contract and the concept of hegemonic masculinity allow us to track the rise of a fraternal order within the nation state at war. Within this corpus of literature we see the emergence of a privileged and youthful imagination of masculinity which surpasses both the father and the state in favour of the nation. Therefore, not only is Iran-Iraq War fiction an understudied set of literature which merits a comparative study of intraregional conflict, (as opposed to occupation and resistance conflict), it also allows for a sustained analysis of male literary representation.

One of the key by-products of this study is to highlight a major gap in the study of contemporary Iraqi and Iranian fiction. However, this notwithstanding, the primary aim of the study is to shed light, from a comparative perspective, on how gender and more specifically masculinity are viewed and represented in literature by both Iraqi and Iranian writers within the context of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The key question it seeks to address is how Iran-Iraq War fiction distinguishes between dominant and hegemonic masculinities, and in what ways these representations are used to comment on the state of the the nation. As such this study examines how
representations of masculinities are deployed within the narratives to create larger political and national observations. It is particularly the use of male sexuality as a social and political critique which can simultaneously undermine state narratives of gender whilst building and asserting hegemony which forms the primary focus of the textual analysis in this study.

These questions which form the underlying basis of the research are not meant, however, to assume that all Iranian and Iraqi fiction serves a political purpose. In fact the politicisation of literature and "the all-too-facile tendency to relate aesthetic changes to socio-political ones...appears to be both reductionist and simplistic." This study, therefore, does not intend to transfer a polemic on to the works analysed here, or to extrapolate sociological realities; instead this study assumes topical relevance in fiction. After all, prose fiction, particularly those works which examine their respective societies during the Iran-Iraq War, have often deployed sexuality and refined visions of masculinity as part of a wider social commentary, indicating that male hegemony is not always the exclusive preserve of the state. Just as intellectual history constantly reconstructs its vision of society, in literature this has been most noticeable through its shifting depictions of masculinities.

Whilst state narratives deployed a vision of their ideal man and his female counterpart, texts which fall outside of state narratives, also employ representations of male characters as a social and political critique. In particular, one of the most significant tropes to emerge in all of the texts studied here is that of the declining and contested status of the father. Conflation of the father figure with tradition, backwardness and authoritarianism has meant that his various connections are often the site of a text’s critique. His presence, and more notably his absence, contests the notion that the patriarch, a role so often assumed to be at the core of male power, is radically disrupted as the war becomes a social force which draws male characters into new structures of male power. The war, in this fiction, presents a unique opportunity for masculinity to build an alternative vision of hegemony; one which inherently rejects both authoritarian rule and patriarchal power. In the wake of seismic societal shifts and authoritarian rule, male characters are at the heart of the novels’ vision of the nation-state. It is no surprise then that the socio-historical context for these texts is one

\[^{13}\text{Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, 'Introduction: Iran’s Literature 1977-1997,' Iranian Studies, 30:3-4 (Summer/Fall 1997), 195-213 (p.196)}}\]
which encompassed radical shifts in tangible policies and intangible narratives of
gender in both countries. These policies, though directly concerned with women, are
in the novels dealt with both directly and indirectly according to their consequences
for men. Such a textual strategy indicates the inherently inter-relational nature of
gender in the texts and the mode with which the study will consider these contexts.
1.3: PRIMARY TEXTS AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this project is a textual analysis of eight works of fiction, in their original language of production (i.e. in Persian or Arabic respectively) by both Iranian and Iraqi authors who experienced the Iran-Iraq War. The criteria for selecting the fiction are contingent upon the subject matter (i.e. it takes place within Iranian and/or Iraqi society during the period of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the themes in the fiction. The selection of texts, particularly the Iraqi texts, has not been without its difficulties. The series of conflicts, sanctions and the fragmented nature of Iraqi literature, in addition to the promotion of poetry over prose in Iraq, have led to some major difficulties in identifying texts for analysis. The nature of this project has been difficult to convey given that most Iraqi writers are, understandably, more concerned with the contemporaneous state of Iraq following the 2003 US occupation. In addition to that there is also a broader consensus that Iraqi poetry does and should receive greater critical acclaim and scholarly attention. It is in the shadow of these considerations that the selection texts has been shaped by suggestions made by Haifa Zangana, the eminent Iraqi writer and activist, and to her I am extremely grateful. I am also forced to justify my decision to ignore poetry in this analysis despite its huge prevalence and popularity in both Iran and Iraq. This was done, however, because of limited space and the need to maintain a focus without cross-marrying genres of literary expression.

The selection of Persian texts was considerably more straight-forward. The ability to travel to Iran has meant that this research has benefitted from direct access to bookshops, libraries and advice which remote research is no substitute for. In particular visits to bookshops which specialise in the Iran-Iraq War have been an invaluable resource. All of the texts that have been selected here are listed in the Kitab-Shanasi Dafa‘ Muqaddas⁴ (The Bibliography of the Sacred Defense), a huge and all-encompassing two volume work which has collected and recorded all bibliographic information about texts written in Persian (even those texts which have been banned) about the Iran-Iraq War.

The analysis of the eight texts is arranged chronologically and is divided between chapters three and four according to their period of production. The Persian texts which will be examined are: In chapter 3 Zamastan-i ’62 (Winter of ’83) by Esma’il Fassih15 and Zamin-i Sukhtah16 (Scorched Earth) by Ahmad Mahmud. Both novels were written in the first years of the war, and despite radically different literary styles both tell stories about life in Ahvaz from the civilian perspective. Each novel is a heartfelt elegy to the destruction of the city-scape, and the survival of its civilians. Mahmud and Fassih were both prolific and well-established writers before the outbreak of the war, and given that the South-West frontier was their place of residence, they were inspired by the events that they witnessed first-hand. The later Iranian novels which are discussed in chapter 4 are: Safar bah Garay 270 Darajah17 (Journey Heading 270 Degrees), a novel about life on the frontline told from the perspective of a young Basiji, by Ahmad Dehqan- himself a Basiji during the war. The final novel written in Persian which will be examined is Fal-i Khun18 (Fortune Told in Blood) by Davud Ghaffarzadegan. This novel offers a radically different perspective on the war as Ghaffarzadegan attempts to humanise the Iraqi enemy by writing from the perspective of a young Iraqi soldier.

The Iraqi texts which will be analysed in chapter 3 will be Matar Taht al-Shams19 (Rain under the Sun) by ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser, a collection of short stories published in 1987 which forms a discussion of poverty and authoritarianism through a complex and highly allegorical narratological mode by utilising magical realism to disguise its intent to criticise a brutal authoritarian regime. The second text is Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qaribal20 (A Sky so Close) by Betool Khedairi, a diaspora novel, which discusses Khedairi’s experience of the Iran-Iraq war as she comes of age before leaving Iraq for a life in London. In chapter 4 the two Iraqi novels which form the basis of discussion are I’jaam21 by Sinan Antoon and al-Fatit al-Muba’thar22 (Scattered Crumbs) by Muhsin

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1 Esma’il Fassih, Zamastan-i ’62 (Tehran: Mu’ssasah Gustaresh Farhang, 1987)  
3 Ahmad Dehqan, Safar Bah Garay 270 Darajah, (Tehran: Sureh Mehr, 1996)  
6 Betool Khedairi, Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba! (Beirut: The Arab institute of Research and Publishing, 1999)  
7 Sinan Antoon, I’jaam, (Beirut: Dar al-Adab lil-Nashr wa al-Tur‘i, 2003) I have maintained the terminology specific title transliterated from the Arabic in accordance with the author’s own title for the English version of the novel. As such the title remains transliterated rather than translated.
al-Ramli. Both novels, again written within the diasporic community, form an incisive and vitriolic critique of a regime which forced its people to endure war whilst persecuting any form of dissent or freedom of expression. The setting for all of the Iraqi novels, with the exception of *al-Fati al-Muba’thar*, is Baghdad and the major theme is the effect of tyrannical authoritarianism on the Iraqi nation.

Each of the novels, as well as Nasser’s collection of short-stories, depicts a broad range of perspectives and political stance, thus taking the canon beyond the frontline testimonials which have characterised Iran-Iraq War fiction. To varying degrees all the texts engage with the politics of wartime society but they are works of literature in their own right. They are produced as imaginative and creative works of fiction as opposed to primacy of individual experience which constitutes memoir. This is an important selection criterion not only because memoir has been the predominant stylistic choice appropriated by both governments to transmit their ideologies, but because it comprises a legitimate method through which to focus this study. The huge number of testimonials, memoirs and biographies which emerged from the state publishing houses Sazman-i Tablighat-i Islami Huzah Humari and Dar al-Shu’un in both Iran and Iraq respectively has saturated the Iran-Iraq War literature market in both countries. Whilst these texts are a fascinating research subject in their own right, an analysis of them and the role that they play in popular discourse is not the focus of this study. Whilst the novels and collections of short stories here occupy a variety of political and social perspectives, they have all been selected as works of fiction which construct artificial worlds through plot, character and narrative choices.

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1.4: INTRODUCTION TO IRAN-IRAQ WAR FICTION: KEY ISSUES

The importance of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) in shaping contemporary society and politics in both Iran and Iraq is undeniable. The far-reaching and devastating consequences of the twentieth century’s longest war became the single most important historical catalyst in the consolidation of both Saddam Hussein’s regime in Baghdad, and Imam Ruhollah Khomeini’s Islamic regime in Tehran. Known in Iraq as the Qadissiyat Saddam, it was referred to as such to create a strong national narrative which linked the war to the defeat of the Zoroastrian Sassanian Empire by Arab Islamic invaders in A.D 664. Likewise, in Iran the war is still commonly referred to as the “da’fa’ muqaddas” (the sacred defense) or “jang-i tahmili” (the imposed war), in reference to the martyrdom of Hussein by the Ummayad caliphate. These emotive narratives of the war played an unparalleled role in cementing the power of both regimes, and had ramifications for both countries which can still be felt today.

Consequently, the Iran-Iraq War is most often discussed for its military strategies, its political manoeuvres and even peripherally for its social consequences, rather than in a sustained discussion of its literary endeavours. These discussions often characterise the outbreak of war in terms of a particular combination of factors. These include the positing of deep-rooted cultural enmities between Iran and Iraq, megalomaniacal tendencies of Saddam Hussein, Iraq’s regional aspiration in the face of Iranian revolutionary turmoil, Iran’s attempt to foment Shi’a uprising in Iraq by exporting the revolution and disputes over the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Whilst post-war scholarship has begun to assess the outbreak of war through political and ideological prisms, this inevitably means that it works within frameworks of universally held truisms of each country’s ideological, religious and historical character. However, as Thom Workman has explained,

Although each of these accounts contains a kernel of truth, they remain woefully inadequate in that they fail to contextualise socially the Iran-Iraq War. They afford little attention to the

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The complex social relations that were at work in both countries are rarely afforded consideration in subsequent analyses. Even so, by the time that hostilities ended and both sides accepted UN resolution 598\(^\text{27}\) there were two profiteers from the conflict, despite the fact that neither side made any definitive gains. These were, undoubtedly, the Ba'ath regime in Iraq and the Islamic clerics of Iran, who had used the war to consolidate their respective rules. By the end of the war Iraq had eliminated most of its internal opposition, which mainly came from the Kurds in the north, leftist groups and the Shi'a majority in the South. Similarly in Iran, the war had allowed clerical rule to be consolidated as the war became an external threat which had to be responded to by all Iranian people. This allowed the clerics to ‘use the war as a blanket-like pretext to silence their critics and marginalise their internal opposition.’\(^\text{28}\) It also allowed the clerics to narrate a uniquely religious character to the war which sustained Islamic revolutionary fervour. This process, which continues to the present day, maintains its image through the appropriation of public space deploying murals, rituals, commemoration of the dead and organizations which remain at the epicentre of maintaining theocratic rule. Likewise, under Saddam Hussein’s regime, the cultivation of the image of war seized public space: art, murals, statues and memorials were erected as part of huge vanity projects glorifying an imaginary but highly compelling version of Iraq as a unified, homogenous, secular land under the rule of Saddam Hussein’s glory.

**1.5: SOCIETY AND FICTION**

The development of prose literature at the beginning of the twentieth century in both Iran and Iraq led to fiction being strongly grounded in political and social issues, as literature was increasingly viewed as a vehicle for social change.\(^\text{29}\) As the century progressed, the brutal and repressive governments of both countries imposed

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\(^{26}\) Workman, p.23


\(^{29}\) Talattoof, p. 1-2
increasingly harsh censorship over their creative communities. This meant that ‘writers were subject to growing social pressures, regardless of their individual political views, to dissociate themselves from the political establishment,’ whilst carefully negotiating the state’s censorship laws. This has placed constraints on literary development inside the creative communities of both Iran and Iraq; not only from the state’s own censorship policies, but also because the politics of the text have been afforded so much significance from its critical audience. The importance placed on literature acting as an oppositional political voice has, in turn, created its own form of censorship outside of actual state censorship, because specific political messages within literary texts has been afforded so much importance in their critical reception. The culture of writing in both Iran and Iraq has created an atmosphere in which literary critics and authors have valued specific types of texts which deal with specific social and political themes. This reflects a typical trend in the critical receptions of literature as Farzaneh Milani has noted:

Unwritten laws had developed to communicate to every artist the expectations of the avant-garde intellectual community. A corpus of literary strictures insisted that only certain kinds of experiences, certain kinds of characters, and certain views on society were worthy of serious consideration. These authors who violated these notions of socio-political engagement or proper thematic concern faced social stigmatization, slight, or neglect. Such pressure, when one group limits the expression of others, amounts to little more than censorship.⁵

Whilst the tendency for academics and the creative community to judge Persian and Arabic literature on the basis of its political engagement has been due to its importance in subverting the status quo, it has also been responsible for limiting the scope of literature which is judged to be worthy of consideration. Nevertheless, the importance that both regimes have afforded literature in both conveying and undercutting their major ideological visions has meant that it is an aspect of literature which cannot be ignored. As such the importance that literature has been afforded has inevitably meant that censorship and the regimes’ attitudes to their writers had intentional and unintentional consequences on literary production, dominant styles, and themes. It is, as a consequence, difficult to not talk about the politics of these texts

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⁶ Milani, (1985), p. 331
without dismissing a vital form of engagement with each political regime; both of which have been characterised by control and censorship.

Even writers producing literature from within the diaspora have had to deal with and recognise the implications of the hand of censorship upon their works. Whilst attention has been drawn to the covert messages, particularly in Iranian literature, that were used to avoid censorship, there have been subsequent moves to recognise the subjectivity of the censor in Iraqi and Iranian works which has played their own role in shaping literary production.

1.6: THE EXPERIENCE OF CENSORSHIP

The general perception of Iran-Iraq War fiction has meant that most scholarly work has tended to assume that it is purely propaganda, saturated as it is by government-sponsored literature of no real literary value. As Foulkes has noted:

> It has been customary to divide literature into ‘good’ works and ‘bad’ works. The aesthetic criteria on which such judgments are based are not clearly established, and indeed the history of literature is littered with arguments concerning relative ‘greatness’ or otherwise of individual authors and texts...one could differentiate between works which question and subvert value systems and beliefs from works which assimilate and reinforce such systems and one could then proceed to an inquiry into the values which inform the reading and critical reception of the works.\(^a\)

If this is the case then what is propaganda and how is it possible to subvert it? Broadly speaking, propaganda can largely be defined as literature which supports the current value system and is closely linked with and propagated by ruling institutions in order to legitimise and naturalise their own hegemony. A vast amount of literature was produced in both countries, at the behest of the state, which unconditionally supported the state and the war and which successfully masked higher quality literary works which dealt with the war in a more complex way. The large body of literature about the Iran-Iraq War, mainly produced by the government publishing houses *Huzah Hunar* and *Dar al-Shu‘un*, in Iran and Iraq respectively, has taken the form of a wide variety of genres. These include: autobiography, biography, memoir, novels, short stories and children’s literature, as well as poetry, plays and songs. However, it is too simplistic to explain Iran-Iraq war literature in terms of a simple dichotomy of pro-

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war and anti-war fiction, particularly in view of the constraints of writing under regimes which suppress dissenting voices.

The pattern of censorship in both countries has had a huge influence on literary production. Before the Islamic revolution in Iran the Shah’s regime and the Ba’athist state in Iraq both operated fairly similar systems of censorship. Both used “carrot and stick” approaches with their writers, deploying prohibitive methods of censorship which ‘tended to stifle expression and impose silence,’ simultaneously rewarding writers who supported the state and silencing those who did not. Whilst Hussein retained this method of censoring writers, the post-revolutionary Islamic regime in Iran sought to disseminate its ideas by co-opting writers, essentially ‘dictating what ideas ought to be propagated and how,’ thus emphasising a shift from the prohibitive to the prescriptive. The creative environment of the Iran-Iraq War was extremely repressive, perhaps because both regimes realised that support for the state would most effectively be disseminated through cultural vehicles. Accordingly, Saddam Hussein’s famous assertion that ‘the pen and the barrel of the gun have one and the same opening,’ provides an interesting insight into the regime’s interest in the arts. Similarly in Iran, the new regime was quick to close down the dissenting voice of the Writer’s Association of Iran, and set up its own cultural institutions which promoted the ideology of the regime.

The role of censorship in the development of literature in the Iranian and Arab world is one of great importance; not only to the overall thematic content of Iranian and Arab literature but also to the general development of style and language. Much of the style that has become characteristic of quintessentially Iranian and Iraqi literature has developed due to the circumnavigation of censorship, because allusion and metaphor are embedded into fiction in order to express political and social views. As Karimi-Hakkak has noted:

> Words like “winter,” “night,” “tulip,” “forest” because of its [sic] association with the guerrilla movement in the northern forests of Iran, and “gol-e sorkh” (rose) had to be banished from

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*Karimi-Hakkak, (1990), p. 142


This canon of codes, allusions and metaphors is part of a latent cipher system understood by writer and reader. It allows the writer to express his or her views to the reader without jeopardising chances of publication or generating opportunities for the regime to undertake more punitive measures against the author. A cat and mouse game emerged as codes were frequently changed and reworked to escape government censorship.

The process of censorship, however, was not a simple one in either country. There were no strict codes which specifically subjected texts to government censorship, and there were no definitive frameworks or codes to which a novel or short story could abide. In this case the process of censorship in both countries bears remarkable similarities. Firstly, although both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Iraq guaranteed the right to free speech in their respective constitutions, both contained clauses of exceptions which were inevitably exploited. In Iraq, during the 1980s the publication of materials was strictly controlled under the Ministry of Culture and Information Act and rules from the 1968 Press Act prohibited publication on twelve specific topics ‘including those detrimental to the president, the Revolutionary Command Council, and the Ba’ath party.’ Similarly, the Iranian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression but with the stipulation that it should not be ‘detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified in law.’ As Blake Atwood has noted, no such law governing this exception has ever been legislated, and the only form of clarification has come from a resolution from the Supreme Council which was passed in 1984. In both countries the lack of specificity and deliberate ambiguity

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40 Green, p. 294
42 Blake Atwood, ‘Sense and Censorship in the Islamic Republic of Iran,’ World Literature Today, 86: 3 (June 2012), 38-41 (p. 39)
43 Ibid.
surrounding the codes and practices of censorship was an important element in the control the dissemination of representation and information. In reality both countries mediated their censorship through the interpretive skills of single individuals who whose sole recommendation would determine what could or could not appear within a publication; or even if it could be published at all. This method which emphasised individual interpretation of what was or was not forbidden, created an insidious environment in which writers were forced to consider the interpretations of their writing by the single censor who would decide its fate.

The subjectivity of Iranian and Iraqi writers has thus been under attack. Whilst some writers have chosen to convey hidden messages through tropes, allusions and metaphors, others have chosen to examine the process of censorship itself. Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi intellectual featured in this study, is one such writer, and like his Iranian counterparts, he directly engages with the censor through specific narrative strategies. Just as the Iranian writer Shahriar Mandanipour acknowledges the censor in his novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* through the use of redactions, and by intervening into the text as the author in order to explain his use of veiled language and how it is being used to evade the censors, Sinan Antoon violates his readers by forcing their experience of his prisoner memoir through the interpretation of his censor and would-be rapist; an employee of the Ministry of Culture and Information. Likewise ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser also introduces the subjectivity of censorship to his readers in his short-story ‘Cinema’. This tale allows the reader unparalleled insight into the processes of censorship behind closed doors; a tale undoubtedly derived from first-hand experience by Sattar himself. The story begins with a film director who after obtaining his PhD in cinematography moves on to producing and directing his first feature film ‘The Locked Door.’ The film is:

The story of a women, who enters the door of the Shari’a court, to ask about an issue which had been on-going for more than a year in which a lawyer had stolen her money after he had failed to secure her a divorce from her drunken husband, which because of his daily beatings is finally the cause of the agonising death of her small son. This women-enters the court chambers to ask about the situation and get answers-and she discovers at the denouement of

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* Refer to Atwood, ‘Sense and Censorship,’ and Green, ‘Iraq,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Censorship*, p. 293
* Nasser, p. 131
* Nasser, p. 131
the film that the judge who has the authority to decide upon her divorce, gets drunk with her husband every night. When her hopes and dreams die, she kills her son with her own hands and the film ends with a scream cursing a world teeming with corruption and conspiracies. The camera remains in the face of the woman with the words “The End” on them as she exits the door of the court.\footnote{Nasser, p. 132}

Whilst the filming, producing and editing are performed swiftly and succinctly once the film is passed to censors the whole process seemingly grinds to a halt despite his admission that he had censored himself ‘to help get the film through the circle of censors as quickly as possible.’\footnote{Nasser, p. 133} Initially, when the film is seen by the censorship committee their initial response seems favourable. The first censor pronounces his film a work of genius, with only the short proviso that maybe he shorten the woman’s terrible scream at the end of the film.\footnote{Nasser, p. 135} The second censor in turn also pronounces the film a work of genius but requests that he takes the “pointless” parts out of the film such as the story of the lawyer stealing from the woman. After this, the committee president also comes to him, pronounces that he will soon become a famous director and that the world will know his work for a long time to come, and then demands that he cut the death of the child from the film in order not to strain public sensibilities.\footnote{Nasser, p. 137}

Upset but undeterred, the narrator goes the next day to the Ministry of Film Exhibition to receive the written report of his film. Despite the previous day’s comments, the changes required to screen his film go on for five pages. He is told to change the title from ‘The Locked Door,’ to ‘The Open Door,’\footnote{Nasser, p. 138} and to reduce the length of the divorce case from one year to one week in case women watching the film are made to feel hopeless.\footnote{Nasser, p. 138} Most telling of all, the narrator is requested to ‘cut the representation of the drunken husband in the film to protect the reputation of the man-in a more general way-so that modern citizens do not resemble past citizens.’\footnote{Nasser, p. 139}

The final point suggests that any indication that the female protagonist has entered the Shari’a court should be completely removed from the film. The departing words determine that the film is in fact an excellent piece of film making and that it will be a
great contribution to contemporary Arab cinema.\textsuperscript{45} Left in a complete state of shock, the film is re-edited until he considers the most beautiful thing in the film to be his name in the credits and the words, “The End.”\textsuperscript{46}

The story depicts the whims and opinions of individuals as barriers to the production of art and therefore its public consumption. There are no attempts by the narrator to disguise the meaning of his tale because he does not read the film as a criticism of the regime. Later, in hindsight he understands that the film that he poured ‘his tears, money and patience into’ has been subjected to a process which ‘could not be repeated in any other country, at any other time, or by any other censors.’\textsuperscript{47} There is a sense that this experience is specific to Iraq during the 1980s.

This interaction between state, writer, reader and the individual censor has forced Iranian and Iraqi writers into a relationship with censorship, even if it is one based in hostility. All the fiction in this study exists within a context of government propaganda and the eye of the censor, interacting variously with each of them. As a result, all of the texts under study contain elements of propaganda and subversion which both legitimise and destabilise the social order that constitute the subject of this fiction. Accordingly, this study recognises a spectrum of understanding which is always in flux. As Achim Rohde contends, ‘it would be misleading to assume a simple dichotomy between a regime-sponsored mass culture and a (suppressed) authentic popular culture. A more or less dynamic interaction is taking place between the two.’\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{WRITING IN IRAQ: CENSORSHIP, PROPAGANDA AND PUNISHMENT}

Perhaps the most famous works of Iraqi propaganda are Saddam Hussein’s own literary endeavours, which included four novels, and the infamous racist polemic by Hussein’s uncle entitled: “Three whom God should not have created: Persians, Jews and Flies.”\textsuperscript{49} These works framed nationalist and racist discourses through ancient historical myths of difference, and framed clear narratives of “Iraqiness” through representations of ideal manliness (represented in Hussein’s novels by, of course, himself).

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Nasser, p. 140
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Nasser, p. 140
  \item \textsuperscript{47} Nasser, p. 133
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Rohde, p. 188
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Khairullah Tulfah, ‘Three whom God should not have created: Persians, Jews and Flies,’ (Baghdad: Dar al-Hurriya, 1940; reprinted 1981)
\end{itemize}
For Iraqi writers Hussein’s rise to power was catastrophic. His assertions that Iraq’s cultural output should serve the sole function of promoting Ba’athist ideology and the revolution\textsuperscript{60} meant that ‘a number of writers were banned, imprisoned or executed for alleged opposition to the war....and the regime was not hesitant in making open threats to every intellectual and academic.’\textsuperscript{61} By the time the war started, in 1980, the regime under Saddam Hussein had already cleared the literary landscape of its critics. Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi writer and intellectual, has observed that:

> After the 1979 collapse of the National Front, the political alliance between the Baath [sic] and the Iraqi Communist Party, hundreds of writers and artists fled into exile, and many others were killed, imprisoned and silenced. The baathification of culture left behind a docile chorus with very few dissonant notes.\textsuperscript{62}

Amatzia Baram has likewise observed that the relationship between the regime and its artists has been submissive rather than collaborative: ‘The symbiosis between the regime and its artists has not been a voluntary one. An artist who wishes to stay in Iraq and create has little choice but to tow the official line.’\textsuperscript{63} This accounts for the wide spectrum of criticism that features in the novels within this study. Those writers who worked in exile and were published in other countries in the Arab world had more freedom to be openly critical of the regime. As such all of the openly subversive texts within this study were written in diaspora and published abroad (though this was in itself no guarantee of personal safety). Muhsin al-Ramli’s \textit{al-Fatit al-Muba’thar}, which openly mocks, satirises and criticises the regime, was written in Spain and published in Cairo. Similarly, Sinan Antoon’s \textit{I’jaam}, which was written in the US and published in Beirut, reacts to and uncovers government propaganda, and openly criticises Hussein’s regime. Even so, such was the internalising discipline of Saddam’s regime and his network of enforcers, even those in exile feared his influence.\textsuperscript{64} The reality of producing texts which did not support the regime, or at least were devoid of criticisms towards it, was usually a prison sentence, though other more brutal tactics were often employed. These tactics ranged from intimidation, extra-judicial prison sentences,

\textsuperscript{60} Jonathon Green, p. 293
\textsuperscript{62} Sinan Antoon, ‘Bending History’
torture which also included rape or rape of female family members.\footnote{Rape as a tactic for conformity has only been confirmed in Iraq though this is still the subject of research as many women will not admit to being raped. For more information refer to Kanan Makiya, Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)} This is not only true of texts produced inside the country but also in diaspora if members of a writer’s family still lived under Hussein’ regime or where expatriates considered themselves to be in the reach of agents from their homeland.

The experience of writers from Iraq has never been systematically recorded, partly because of Iraq’s fragmented and displaced population, and partly because the internal state of the country makes it impossible to conduct systematic fieldwork. Even those writers who remained in Iraq during Saddam’s regime and worked around his restrictions were later forced to leave in the wake of the violence and virtual civil war that broke out following the 2003 American invasion. Writers such as Lutfiyya al-Dulaimi, who remained in Baghdad until very recently, were forced out by the growing violence against the population perpetrated by militia and sectarian aligned groups. Al-Dulaimi, has stated that she decided not to return to Iraq whilst she was on a short trip to Amman to visit family members; her neighbours having informed her that her house had been looted and was now being occupied by one of the militia groups who, whilst forcing entry into the house, had also killed her banwah.\footnote{Lutfiyya al-Dulaimi, interview conducted by Jennifer Chandler, July 2010, Amman, Jordan} Al-Dulaimi, like Betool Khedairi,\footnote{Betool Khedairi, interview conducted by Jennifer Chandler, July 2010, Amman, Jordan} has been reluctant to discuss politics, sectarianism or ideology in her works. Both claim a humanist rather than a political position. This can of course be read in two ways: the first as a form of self-protection, a refusal to engage with political issues; and the second as a form of dissent, a refusal to allow the regime to occupy their literary focus.

What should be taken into consideration though was the penalty for lack of self-censorship. Writers who crossed the state were systematically imprisoned and tortured, experiences which are featured in several works in this study. Characters in both Sinan Antoon’s I’jaam and Muhsin al-Ramli’s al-Fatīt al-Mubāthar spend part of the narrative in prison, and as such the literary relationship between politics, the regime and the war are often linked through prison space. Novels which are openly critical of the regime tend to deal more directly with life under the regime, rather than...
the frontline or the Iranian enemy; it is the enemy within that is the focus of this writing. Yet these writers were at least able to openly criticise the regime from the outside, despite the fear of Ba’athi agents abroad. For writers such as ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser his criticism of the regime, as for many other writers, ended in prison.

In 1975 ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser published in Beirut a satire Sayyiduna al-Khalifa (Our Lord the Caliph) that captured the essential quality of the Ba’thi rule: “Sorrow is absolutely prohibited, as noted by the Caliph in the margins of file number 105B, which is an appendix to the decree of al-Hadjadj ibn Yusif that states: laugh a lot so that we can show you off to the world. ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser committed the mortal sin of scorning the Ba’th. Shortly after publication, he was arrested charged with spying for an unnamed country, and tortured.”

Even writers who had written about the war were not safe from the regime. As Muhsin al-Musawi reports, ‘at least three short story writers suffered imprisonment, and two were executed. Those two were among the winners in the best war story competition.’

The fates of Hassan Mutlaq, ‘Abd al-Hakim, and Mahmud Jindari, which al-Musawi reports in his study, correlates with testimonies from other Iraqi writers who have experienced similar treatment at the hands of the regime. In an interview in London in May 2007 Haifa Zangana, a prominent contemporary Iraqi writer and activist, stated that after she had been imprisoned she was watched every day: ‘I had to report to the authorities every month. I was frequently taken for interrogation without prior warning.’ The act of writing in Iraq is a political, as well as a literary activity, and many writers and intellectuals were and are actively involved in political activism. As a result, the experience of prison and the limits of self-expression have given rise to a distinctive though nonetheless tangible quality of self-censorship in Iraqi writing. Accordingly, the specific circumstances of producing literature under these particular regimes means that its overt critique is often codified. In addition, more often than not, works of fiction are subversive through their silences at precisely those points where both the Iranian and Iraqi regimes wanted their writers to actively support the party line.

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68 Makiya, p.123 (The story by ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser first appeared in Al-Mawqif al-Adabi, Beirut, no. 9 (January 1975) and was reprinted in Free Kurdistan, London, no. 6 (December 1975).  
69 al-Musawi, p. 85  
The relaxation of censorship in the disarray immediately following the revolution led to an eruption of intellectual and creative activity in Iran. This was quickly suppressed as different political groups, particularly the Marxist Tudeh party, in a bid to ingratiate itself with the newly established regime supported the re-implementation of state censorship. Even writers who were opposed to the war used its outbreak as a ‘last-ditch effort for survival’ by denouncing Iraqi aggression and supporting the government’s war efforts. The Writer’s Association of Iran published a special issue of its literary magazine Namah-ay Kanun-i Navisandagan-i Iran devoted to the war, in an attempt to find common cause with the state, as it increasingly curtailed the freedoms of its creative elite. Thus the upsurge of patriotism led writers to broadly support the war even if they questioned the moral and human dimension of warfare.

The common cause that the war had made between writers and the state, (or at the very least that had successfully silenced dissenting voices), has made it very difficult to judge literature about the Iran-Iraq War according to how openly it subverts the status-quo. Iran’s position as victim meant that it has been very difficult for writers to denounce the war when it was not directly instigated by Tehran. As such the distinction between patriotism and pro-war discourse, which for a time collided, has made it difficult to distinguish between literature, propaganda and patterns of censorship.

Whilst the pattern of censorship in Iraq pursued ‘a classical state policy of rewards and punishments’ towards its writers, the policy of suppressing dissenting voices in Iran changed trajectory after the revolution. The new regime that came to power in Iran following the 1978-1979 revolution started to clamp down on writing once it had begun to fully consolidate its hold on state power. By 1981 the regime had established a Ministry of Islamic Guidance, which was expected to review all material for publication in an attempt to purge non-Islamic elements from public discourse.

Even though the regime pushed through a unilateral policy of ideological conformity, the methods used to enforce this strategy were reminiscent of both the Shah and the

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71 Karimi-Hakkak, ‘Protest and Perish,’ p.224
72 Karimi-Hakkak, ‘Of Hail and Hounds,’ p. 174
73 Karimi-Hakkak, ‘Protest and Perish,’ p. 191
74 Karimi-Hakkak, ‘Censorship’, p. 140
Ba’athist regime in Iraq, at least as regards the extent of their brutality. Methods used to bring writers into line consisted of a number of extra-legal actions including ‘threats to the lives of individuals and organized attacks on bookstores by gangs of *hezbollahis.*’ The regime also utilised direct economic strategies to control the creative arena by establishing a state monopoly on the importation of paper, ink and the parts for print machinery. The vicious methods deployed by armed militant groups against writers, were also used against intellectuals: there inevitably followed purges in the universities.

As the Islamic regime consolidated its power, the Writers’ Association of Iran, which had played a significant role in the revolution, was brutally shut down. Following the Haft-i Tir bombings, the Writers’ Association of Iran had its offices raided, documentation and tapes seized, and Soltanpur, a member of the board who had already been arrested, was executed. Consequently, many of the active members of the association went into hiding and eventually smuggled themselves out of the country. The effect of the Islamic revolution and the ensuing clamp down on freedom of expression, helped to contribute to the large number of Iranian writers and intellectuals emigrating to Europe. These writers continued to write about their homelands even if there was a new sense of dislocation in their writing as they came to terms with their exile. Those writers who remained in Iran continued to be subject to rigorous censorship, and at times intimidation and imprisonment. Writers such as Shahrnush Parsipur, who spent over four years in prison during the 1980s, were incarcerated because of their writing. Less directly the prohibitive process of publishing in Iran acted in itself as a deterrent to creative expression. Writers like Moniru Ravanipur have lamented the state of publishing in Iran saying that:

> The experience of publishing a book in Iran is an extremely difficult process. The last 30 years have been (cleansing/censorship) but it has had its highs and lows [sic]. I was very beleaguered around my first book [sic]. The book was enslaved and held hostage for 8 years before it got to print. But after 1369 (1990) the situation got a little better and I was able to publish my books Del-e Foolad (Heart of Steel), Ahl-e Ghargh (The Drowned) and Sangha-ye Sheytan (Satan’s Stones). Since we are at the mercy of censorship we cannot follow the usual writing protocol. Often, a writer’s first book takes much longer to get published than their second or third.

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75 Karimi-Hakkak, ‘Censorship’, p. 141
76 Ibid.
77 Karimi-Hakkak, ‘Protest and Perish,’ p. 224-225
Censorship, which is a relic from the days of slavery, enslaves writers, painters and filmmakers. It does not allow us to publish our books in an organic way. This is why authors like me have learned to write the book and let it sit at home until it’s due for publication [sic].

In spite of the restrictions, writing in Iran has continued to flourish after the revolution. Even within such a repressive, conformist and prohibitive atmosphere, and despite the extent of state control over its literary landscape, Iran has managed to maintain its vibrant literary environment.

A final word should be added about the readership of the fiction in this study. As Ghanoonparvar states in his survey of post-revolutionary trends in Persian fiction and film, ‘the Iran-Iraq War had a tremendous effect on all Iranians, whether they were directly engaged in the fighting or experienced the bombardment of the cities as civilians,’ an application which this thesis assumes applies to Iraqi citizens too. It is these people, though not exclusively, who are the potential readership of this corpus of fiction. It is particularly telling that the more salubrious fiction about the war went through several printings (this is particularly true for Ahmad Mahmud’s novel *Zamin-i Sukhtah*) and enjoyed wide readership. Likewise, there is a growing readership for this corpus of fiction outside of the Iranian and Iraqi literary scene. Like Iraqi literature, where readership figures remain anecdotal, the popularity of literature about the war can only really be extrapolated from the growing number of translations which are available of both Arabic and the Persian war fiction; thus demonstrating that there are non-Arabic and Persian speaking audiences who are interested in the cultural output from this war. Of the fiction analysed in this study, there are translations available for six of the eight texts examined here (though *Zamastan-i 62* has been translated into German not English), and most of these translations were undertaken fairly recently. In addition to this there are on-going translations of Iran-Iraq War fiction suggesting that wider international interest is a continuing trend.

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*For example, Paul Sprachman (a prolific translator of Iranian war fiction) is undertaking the enormous task of translating Zahra Hosseini’s 750 page mixed genre text, *Da*, (Tehran: Sureh Mehr, 2008)*
1.7: Thesis Structure

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Following this chapter, chapter 2 elaborates on the social, political and historical context of gendered representations in Iran and Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and establishes the theoretical premise of this study. It outlines the thesis’s broader theoretical concerns, and discusses the importance of investigating masculinity in militarised contexts. It then defines and situates how the thesis utilises the concept of hegemonic masculinity, by stressing the importance of rejecting the term patriarchy as an all-encompassing term, and instead examines other extraneous factors which constitute male power relations. It is particularly the role of the militarised modern nation-state in forming these relations which form the basis of the theoretical framework for this study. It asserts that masculinity (at least in the realm of representation) is an important marker of the state of the nation. The adoption of this historicised assessment of masculinity is then clarified through an in-depth examination of gender policies in both countries; this demonstrates how the impact of gender policies can be as much determined by an individual's class, age and ethnicity as their categorisation as biologically male or female. Far from the presupposition that each country constitutes a progressive/regressive dichotomy between the secular Iraqi Ba’ath and the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran, this analysis reveals a complex picture which explodes the myth that secular nationalism has a better gender outcome while religious nationalism is automatically more regressive, backward and traditional.

Chapters 3 and 4 comprise the major analytical readings of the texts which form the basis of this study. Chapter 3 offers a close reading of four texts written during the war, and Chapter 4 offers a close reading of four texts written after the war. Though the texts are considered chronologically in two separate chapters, this should not be taken to mean that they comprise two different categories of texts. The end of the war should not be taken to mean that this was the end of a certain type of literary style, and that a new one subsequently emerged in its place. Perhaps one of the most surprising and subtle conclusions that emerges from the analysis of these texts is that contrary to the narrative of representational homogeneity that has been placed on Iran-Iraq war fiction, from the beginning of the war writers have employed diverse and varied themes, literary styles, plots and narratives to represent the war in the literary imagination. Not only that but practical problems such as paper shortages, emigration,
censorship and punitive measures taken against writers has meant that the production of fiction cannot be anchored within specific timeframes. Accordingly, the division of these two chapters by chronology is meant only as recourse for the reader rather than as an indicator of a taxonomical implication. The final chapter (chapter 5) offers a reflection on the issues raised in chapters 3 and 4; examines other major conclusions that can be drawn from a holistic examination of the texts; and considers how they can be situated in larger body of work written about the Iran-Iraq War.
CHAPTER 2: IRAN-IRAQ WAR FICTION: THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

2.1: INTRODUCTION

The intention of this chapter is to provide a contextual account of the fiction in this study, and to establish a theoretical framework through which to understand representations of masculinity. As such, this chapter bridges the gap between actual socio-historical changes which took place within each country, and their transformative representations in literature by placing them within a theoretical framework of masculine hegemony. Taking into account the huge social changes that were taking place in both Iran and Iraq during the 1980s, this chapter draws out the most important themes that were to affect gender relations in both countries, as well as their literature, for the decades to come. Accordingly, this chapter discusses both state-directed legislative policies towards gender, as well as their discursive implications, arguing that it is essential to understand societal and historical contexts in order to fully comprehend the gendered representations depicted in the texts.

The role that fiction plays in governing the discursive reception of masculinity is an important one. According to Joseph Massad:

Fictional writing provides accounts of society that no other mode of representation has been able to provide during the colonial or postcolonial era. Its representation should not be viewed only as reflections of what actually exists necessarily (although they are certainly that often), as much as critiques of what exists and of what does not exist. It is how the world of the novel, short story, or the play is imagined and the uses to which desire and sexual practices are put in such writings that reveal more about reigning ideas in society than they do about the actual reality they purport to depict.\(^8\)

Whilst Massad’s observation is a reflection of Arabic literature in general, its implication for understanding representations of gender relations in Iran-Iraq War fiction is extremely important. The role that fiction plays in communicating normative sexuality, or using deviance as part of a wider social allegory, denotes a set of discursive practices that comment on the state of the nation by utilising gendering practices. As a result, it is often the case that masculinity and male sexuality is delineated through a

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\(^8\) Massad, p. 272
normative/deviant binary, not so much to provide different accounts of masculinities, but to delineate socio-political allegories regarding the nation through gender and, more specifically, through masculinities.\footnote{Massad, p.310-334} For example, as will be discussed at length in chapter four, the main protagonist in Muhsin al-Ramli’s novel \textit{al-Fatt al-Muba’thar} (\textit{Scattered Crumbs}), Qasim, the moral hero of the story, is executed by the authoritarian regime when he refuses to participate in a war that he deems to be immoral. By contrast, his depraved brother, who engages in rape, bestiality and paedophilia, is promoted and reified by the same regime that persecuted Qasim. As such, the decline of normative masculinity, and the privileging of deviant masculinity, constructs a wider socio-political allegory about the state of the Iraqi nation under the rule of the Ba’ath.

An analysis of both state-directed gender policies and more localised social changes illuminates the ambiguous nature of, and sometimes contradictory approaches to, male-female relations within each nation. Gender relations presented a complex problem for both Iran and Iraq, as political ideology interacted and conflicted with the pragmatic needs of waging war. The role that gender relations played within both countries, which were undergoing two distinct paths of modernisation, was of the utmost importance as women, and their relations with men, became an essential component within the discourses of both modernity and traditionalism. In both countries, prior to 1979, modernisation had become coterminous with westernisation. The project of re-disciplining the modern citizen therefore ‘made it necessary to invoke the category of the traditional to mark what was distinctive about the modern.’\footnote{Minoo Moallem, \textit{Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 12} However, by the time that Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, each country’s modernisation project strove to appear free of Western influence, which was seen to corrupt the authenticity of local culture and damage national identity. The effects of these processes with regards to the changing strategies towards the states’ female citizens have been widely discussed in academic literature.\footnote{See for example Nira Yuval-Davis, \textit{Gender and Nation}, (London: Sage Publication, 1997); Margot Badran, \textit{Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Janet Afary, \textit{Sexual Politics in Modern Iran} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)} This is unsurprising considering that women’s bodies became the physical site of the discursive war
between a traditional and modern dichotomy. However, these analyses have failed to address the changes and developments of modernity and nation-state building on both men and women, and thus on gender as an inherently relational category. The tendency to equate gender with women and, therefore, a woman’s perspective with a gendered perspective, reaffirms the category of “man”. Hence masculinity is overlooked whilst scholars strive to deconstruct ‘the two monoliths of “woman” and “nation”’. Both men and women were, and are, subjects of modernisation projects. Men have not simply remained a stable, fixed category, reminiscent of a literary foil, showcasing the development of the modern woman. Men, to the same extent as women, were subject to the social changes that the war and modernisation brought about; and so they were also affected by the gender strategies, which, despite an overt targeting of women, inevitably had consequences for men as well.

What is clear is that both states took pains to narrate a clear vision of masculinities in war time, though these were riddled with ambiguities and, at times, there was a deep schism between both legislative policy and discursive narratives. Legislation that dealt with gender, particularly in the area of private family law, remained entrenched in religious doctrine, in order to appease some men who felt that any intrusion into the private realm was outside the jurisdiction of the state. As such, the state gave the appearance of allowing men to maintain control of their women, as part of a socially contracted bargain whereby they relinquished power in other areas, engaging in what Christine Keating terms the ‘postcolonial sexual contract.’ Though government policy has often given the appearance of empowering all men through a clear mandate for traditional masculine power structures, the reality was that the state policies were dispersed unevenly across different social groups. Ultimately these policies contributed to the creation of hegemonic and subaltern groups which were composed of both men and women. As such, the war, together with other monumental social upheaval and a changing economic landscape simultaneously and variously empowered and disempowered different groups composed of both men and women.

As Paul Hipgate and John Hopton have observed, ‘the nexus linking war, militarism, and masculinity has remained an enduring and consistent feature of societies and their

*Moallem, p. 6
cultures across time.” What is less clear is that militarised masculinity constitutes just one of a multiplicity of masculinities that shape the modern nation state; though the role of hegemonic masculinity that is epitomised by the image of the soldier and the military is naturally an important one when fiction is concerned with war. One of the most important consequences of the war and state discourse was that it promoted and privileged younger men as they were mobilised and drafted into a narrative of national defence. In both societies this discursive pattern fundamentally destabilised the established patterns of male power, which was rooted in older patriarchal social relations, as younger men were afforded social mobility and privilege as they laid down their lives on the battlefield. This not only eclipsed the role of the father from public discourse in war-time society, but is also reflected in their representation in war fiction. Hence patriarchy in these texts comes to signify decline, deviance and decay rather than denote an indisputable bastion of male power. As such, in the political context of the Iran-Iraq War in which some women - in both nations - were disempowered by changing and sometimes outwardly regressive gender policies, others were given new opportunities and abilities to carve out new roles within the public arena of each state, (though this was often confined to state narratives of ideal femininity). However, the role of older men became increasingly ambiguous as a militarised masculinity became the framework of male empowerment privileged by the state. Accordingly, whilst it appears that both states instituted policies that would benefit and privilege men over women, the idea that these would benefit all men was largely illusory.

Therefore, it is necessary to scrutinise these observations through a theoretical lens. As such, this study will utilise R. W Connell’s reformulated version of “hegemonic masculinity” to explain the often amorphous and unstable relations that are demonstrated by representations of masculinity present in this corpus of literature. This concept unpicks the often hierarchical and unequal relations that exist between men and, more importantly, draws out other extra-textual factors that act upon narratives of an elusive male ideal. Moreover, the term is particularly useful when it is isolated from its association with patriarchy, allowing a more nuanced and historicised examination of masculinities in Iran-Iraq War fiction.

Following the publication of Connell’s work *Gender and Power*, the term hegemonic masculinity was proposed in order to refute dominant theoretical frameworks of sex-role theory. Hegemonic masculinity is an important theoretical concept that sheds light on the historical and hierarchical nature of relationships between men, and which can be, distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man; it required all men to position themselves in relation to it.

This concept moved the field of men’s studies away from binary notions of masculinity and femininity and was able to account for shifting power dynamics and the aspirational dominance that was ideated towards a large majority of men. Nevertheless, despite its usefulness, the concept was widely criticized. This was predominantly because the term “hegemonic masculinity” was seen as derivative of a flawed concept of masculinity that essentialised the character of men by imposing ‘a false unity on a fluid and contradictory reality.’ However, if anything, the term does not transpose a unifying practice on to the category of men but reveals a discursive dimension to non-discursive gendered practices, including wage labour, violence, sexuality, domestic labour, and childcare, which constitute the tangible content of power relations between genders. It should not be assumed that gender relations are self-contained, stably reproducing systems; they are constantly being renegotiated, translated, and configured. Thus, ‘without a very clear focus on this issue of historical change, the idea of hegemony would be reduced to a simple model of cultural control.’ Hegemonic masculinity is not simply the enacting of dominance of one group over the other but requires these ‘other’ groups to participate, as it were, in their own oppression by determining and validating what is “normal” or “successful” masculinity. Reliant on legitimacy from subaltern groups, and sensitive to cultural and political changes,

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*R. W. Connell,(2005), p. 831*
hegemonic masculinity is thus relational, temporal, and subjective in its gender practices. Critically, hegemonic masculinity is not predicated on the characteristics that have so often been attributed to it, namely, violence and power acquired through raw physical strength. Instead hegemonic masculinity is a shifting version of itself, consequently it attempts to fix gender relations, rather than constituting them. As Connell points out:

> It is difficult to see how the concept of hegemony would be relevant if the only characteristics of the dominant group were violence, aggression, and self-centeredness. Such characteristics may mean domination but would hardly constitute hegemony - an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups.\(^9\)

And yet, the term hegemony has been persistently associated with the concept of patriarchy, a term which denies the plurality of masculine power, and asserts a single source of male power acquired through age and familial status. This assertion of patriarchy sits uncomfortably with wartime notions of militarised hegemony, which, more often than not, subjugate older patriarchal power in favour of younger men. The notion of patriarchy has been conceived in a number of different ways by schools of feminism, but perhaps the most transformative definition comes from Heidi Hartmann, who defines patriarchy as:

> Relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.\(^9\)

What is surprising is that this definition incorporates hierarchical relationships between men, which align not so much with a traditional rendering of patriarchy as imagined in Middle Eastern societies, but is more congruent with the transition of patriarchy towards, what has been deemed by Carole Pateman as, fraternity or a fraternal social contract.\(^9\) Pateman’s concept of the fraternal social contract describes the negotiation of relations between men in Europe during the eighteenth century as the emergence of modern civil society redrew the relationship between the male

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\(^9\) R. W Connell, (2005), p. 841


citizen and the state. These transformative male relations which came about in conjunction with, and because of, the emergence of modern civil society are analysed by Pateman through a transition from a pre-modern monarchical patriarchy to a system of domination grounded in fraternity. As such the symbolic transition of social relations from being governed by monarchy (the traditional *pater*) to the fraternity of civic society, speaks to a wider reorganisation and negotiation of ideal masculinities which was reflected in wider political and social change. Despite the mutability of male power and dominance, there has been a tendency by feminist scholarship to approach patterns of male dominance in Middle Eastern societies as purely patriarchal; de-emphasising the transition of Middle Eastern societies into nuclear family units, whilst reducing the heterogeneity of Middle Eastern nations and cultures to a standard traditionalised model.

Whilst theorisation of patriarchy in a European context has come under intense scrutiny, there has been little consistent work to examine patriarchy as an analytical framework within Middle Eastern studies. The belt of “classic” patriarchy, in which both Iran and Iraq are purportedly located, denies the fact that:

> In most societies some women have power at least over some men as well as over other women. Nor does it take into account the fact that in concrete situations women’s oppression is intermeshed in and articulated by other forms of social oppression and social divisions.

Indeed, the relationship between patriarchy and hegemony, which has been so regularly cited as the source of female oppression, often negates the multitude of other factors that act on masculine power. The importance of age, class, and ethnicity in defining and constituting social ideals has led to an unstable set of social relations, which are constantly in flux. Within Iraq, the effect of the war was very different for Kurdish, Shi’a, Christian, and Sunni groups, as the state tried to tackle the problems associated with its heterogeneous population. Revolutionary Iran also presents an interesting case as shifting powers and social relations curtailed the rights of some (both men and women), whilst simultaneously allowing others (both men and women)

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* Nira Yuval-Davis, p.7
to engage actively in society in a way not previously possible. The empowerment of some groups over others, in both countries, was not solely dictated by gender therefore, but through a variety of sociological intersections which can broadly be defined as ethnicity, class, and age.

Though the family remains the central social unit in both countries, and family honour is closely linked to women’s controlled virtue, the war was to supersede these traditional family structures and throw patterns of patriarchal dominance into disarray. As the young fought for social change and were the main participants in the war and its social challenges, the role of the older generation, particularly the role of the father, faced a crisis of confidence reflected in their near complete absence from the politicised literary landscape. This phenomenon is not unique. In Portuguese war literature, as Abdoolkarim Vakil notes, ‘fathers were almost absent...and mothers were indeed the most concrete and symbolic evocation of home and patria.’ Though the role of the mother as symbolic of homeland becomes reified in war fiction, the role of the father becomes obsolete as new narratives of masculinity come to the fore through younger men.

The traditional patriarchal father figure is replaced by a fraternal world that has been under-theorised by Middle Eastern studies scholars, particularly in the analysis of literature. In the lives of the protagonists of the Iran-Iraq War fiction analysed in this study, the father is completely absent as a dominant figure: either through physical absence because of death; psychological absence, which results in some form of impotence; or he decays and dies as part of a wider social allegory. For example, in Davud Ghaffarzadegan’s *Fal-i Khun*, and Ahmad Mahmud’s *Zamin-i Sukhtah*, fathers are either dead or passed over in silence. On the other hand, fathers can become contested figures, such as they are in Ahmad Dehqan’s *Safar bah Garay 270 Darajah* and Muhsin Al-Ramli’s *al-Fatit al-Muba’thar*. These older men come to represent male crisis and masculine failure in the works of Esma’il Fassih, Betool Khedairi, and ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser signifying the transition of older men from

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100 Abdoolkarim Vakil, ‘At War with the Nation,’ *Ellipsis Engendering the Nation* number 1 (1999), pp. 122-141 (p. 129)

101 Ghaffarzadegan, (1996)

102 Mahmud, (1982)
dominating patriarch to failed subaltern, thereby juxtaposed against a new hegemonic and fraternal male ideal.

This promotion of youth and fraternity over the wise, older powerful father figure is found throughout the Middle East, both in its sociological landscapes and its subsequent reflection in socially-conscious fiction. For example, in Julie Peteet’s discussion of Palestinian youth during the Intifada, she found that:

The power and status of the older generation were eclipsed. Young males took over the tasks previously the preserve of more mature, often notable men...The older generation, those over the age of thirty-five, played little, if any, visible role in the daily activities of the intifada.\textsuperscript{103}

Hence it comes as no surprise that the discourse of nationalism and masculinity collide at a juncture where rhetoric about courage, honour, and duty are deeply embedded within each other’s ideological structures. The veneration of youth over age, which Julie Peteet observed in her study, has been a consistent feature of societies at war. As such, representations of privileged masculinities are not patriarchal but instead, particularly in war literature, are contingent upon a notion of male-male bonds drawn from the idea of nation. Masculinity is indelibly linked to national teleology, however rather than being mere symbols of nation and land, as women so often are, these relations are clearly structured through the material, rational, and tangible rather than the metaphorical. Aghacy has recognised that:

Contrary to woman’s metaphorical existence, the male relation to the nation is metonymic, and contiguous. This “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1983, 7) is the driving force that is going to liberate the land. Men are supposed to possess an unshakeable commitment and a clear teleological vision and course of action that will grant them the badge of courage to regain the lost land.\textsuperscript{104}

It is the privileging of relations between men that is endemically a part of war and therefore these relations are intrinsically linked to the frameworks through which the nation is imagined. This is no less virulent in its appearance in Iraqi than in Iranian fiction involving the Iran-Iraq War. However, the asymmetrical structures of power


\textsuperscript{104} Samira Aghacy, \textit{Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967} (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), p. 7
relations can be most assiduously uncovered by incorporating an analysis of how fraternal homosocial bonds constitute depictions of the nation.

Since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s thesis on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, in which he provided a definition of the ‘nation’ as ‘an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign,’ there has been a proliferation of studies critiquing and defining what exactly the ‘nation’ is and whether this definition should talk about shared history, ethnicity, culture, or citizenship status. Despite the differing conclusions of various scholarly works, nationalism, as a field of study, has revealed that the concept of the nation has not always existed, and is in fact a modern phenomenon. However, it cannot be said that Iran or Iraq emerged from a vacuum in the nineteenth century, as the connection between the land and its people had existed long before then. The aim then is not to deny a territorial precedent, but simply to acknowledge that Iran and Iraq as they exist now are a product of a modern phenomenon. As Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet notes:

> While premodern frontiers lacked the political connotations of today's borders, they nonetheless pointed to an impulse to assign territorial designations to different people and states. Identifying precedents, however, does not deny the uniqueness of nationalism.

However, the concept of nation has been shown to be more than just political autonomy over a demarcated territory. Nation has been created by something far more subtle than the exercise of political power over an area of land. As Tamar Mayar, referencing Otto Bauer, has pointed out, the ideology of nation is within us, identifying those who are the same and those who are different, expressed through national loyalty. The construction of Iranian and Iraqi national identities has been a product of “imagined” differences, where it has often been asserted that both are mutually exclusive terms despite the large cross-over in cultural, political, and religious identities. Reflecting Anderson’s thesis that the nation, as it is imagined, casts off the heterogeneity of the actual make-up and imagines a brotherhood in which, despite the

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106 Kashani-Sabet, p. 9
108 Houchang Chehabi, Iran and Iraq: Intersocietal Linkages and Secular Nationalisms,’ (Paper presented at the University of Manchester, May 2010)
fact that most citizens will never meet one another, they will have a common bond with all the nation’s other citizens,

because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings.109

Not only did the conflict between Iran and Iraq exploit the idea of nation, it exploited the notion of masculinity and its interaction within the nation state, in military, religious, and other emotive nationalist contexts.

How, then, do war, nation, and masculinity converge? The role of the combatant is almost exclusively played by men, and ‘the exercise of statehood vis-à-vis other nation-states often takes the form of armed conflict. As a result, nationalism and militarism seem to go hand in hand.’110 Despite this, women cannot be excluded from the operations that take place in order to co-opt men to die for their country.111 Militarism is not a process that involves a simple dichotomous gender resolution but, like the process of nationalism, is embedded in asymmetric power relations that govern relations between masculinity, femininity, and the nation, realised through fraternal relations between men.

The assumption that lies at the heart of Anderson’s concept of nation is that it is based on a narrative of hegemonic masculine prerogative. The fraternity, which constitutes nation, draws feminist analysis away from traditional definitions of patriarchy and looks more toward the relationships between men, produced within the context of war and nation. Anderson’s view of fraternity and comradeship therefore envisioned the nation not in a state of peace but in a state of conflict, thus connecting a notion of manhood and nationhood ‘forged through the construction of patriotic masculinity.’112 By specifying that it is narratives of ‘patriotic’, ‘normative’, and hegemonic masculinity that are being investigated here, this study allows masculinity to be destabilised,

109 Anderson, p. 7 (my emphasis)
112 Nagel, p. 397
recognising that dominant narratives that create normative masculinity are not necessarily adhered to by all men. In addition to this, it also asserts that masculinity is not stably reproduced across time and space in order that all men oppress all women, but rather that there are different renderings of ideal masculinity that are set up as a myth of how nationhood and manhood should interact. Not all men adhere to this model, or even successfully replicate it, as is illustrated by the emigration of approximately half a million Iraqi professionals and intellectuals, in addition to the huge numbers of deserters from the army, during the war. However, ‘hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear “natural,” “ordinary,” “normal.”’ For the population at large, the conflict defined normative masculinity within a national context, even if those participants virulently opposed the state. As such, fiction plays an important role by mediating between the realisable and the ideated images of masculinity, without ever lending political support for the sovereignty of the nation in question.

2.3: SOCIO-POLITICAL NARRATIVES OF GENDER IN BA’ATHIST IRAQ

The diverse representations of masculinities, and gender more generally in these texts, demand an examination of the tangible social relations which acted on socially conscious fiction writing in a rapidly evolving and modernising Iraq. Following the 1968 coup d’état, the rise of the Ba’ath party ensured monumental changes to traditional family and thus gender structures in Iraq. Central to the Ba’ath’s pan-Arabist aims was the promotion of women, whose status was seen as a marker of modernity. Women’s subordination was believed to have a negative effect on society and the Ba’ath party ‘identified the inferior status of women as an integral part of the ideology of feudal and tribal society.’ As a result, nation-wide literacy programmes were put into action to combat illiteracy and encourage women into education and the workforce. Between 1970 and 1980 female participation across primary, secondary

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113 Tripp, p. 218
115 Vakil, p. 124
and tertiary education had increased between 310 and 366 percent respectively.\textsuperscript{117} In 1978, in order to educate adults, the Ba’ath embarked on a literacy campaign which obliged all illiterate adults - male and female - to two years’ attendance of one of the many government established literacy programmes.\textsuperscript{118} In addition to promoting widespread literacy and education, the Ba’ath party implemented a number of social policies that inscribed women as members of the labour force, for example, the provision of generous maternity leave and free child-care.

The cursory conclusion that can be drawn from these steps is that the Ba’ath’s policies towards women were particularly enlightened and paved the way for equalising gender relations. Alternatively though, as Suad Joseph has observed, this intervention was not without secondary political motives. According to Joseph, elevation of the position of women in Iraq was important to the Ba’ath, ‘for two reasons: the need for labour and for realigning the allegiances of the population.’\textsuperscript{119} The education of women and their rapid promotion into the public sphere inculcated a particular type of citizenry; it simultaneously weakened ties to traditional kinship groups and promoted the nuclear family as the model, and most important economic unit. Like Joseph, Kanan Makiya’s asserts that the Ba’ath’s forays into the private sphere attempted to strip power from the traditional patriarchs in extended kinship groups replacing them with smaller nuclear families, whose overarching personal loyalty would be to the Ba’ath.\textsuperscript{120}

There can be no doubt that the Ba’ath encouraged the nuclear family as the ideal social model, particularly in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{121} Article 38 of the Ba’ath party constitution stipulated that ‘the state is responsible for protecting and developing the family which is considered to be the basic cell of the nation.’\textsuperscript{122} Furthermore, the Article specified that the state must encourage, facilitate and supervise marriage, which is a national duty, asserting that after the immediate family children should be entrusted to the state.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{117} al-Sharqi, p.81
\textsuperscript{119} Joseph, p.179
\textsuperscript{120} Makiya, p. 80
\textsuperscript{121} Rohde, p. 185
\textsuperscript{122} Joseph, p.187
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
This was, however, to have paradoxical effects where state interests and gender equality clashed. Whilst significant changes were made when it came to freeing

The individual from the hold of the local group, in order to integrate him or her as a citizen into the new nation-state, the constitution seems to baulk at freeing women from the constraints of the Shari’ā-based rules and laws that serve to limit her full autonomy and which confer on her a status secondary to that of the man. 124

In order to understand Ba’athist regression on the issue of women’s personal status laws within its legislative policies, thus denying women power in the private realm whilst simultaneously promoting female emancipation in the public sphere, I contend that the Ba’ath party engaged in what Christine Keating has termed a post-colonial sexual contract. 125 Keating argues that in a post-colonial and religiously diverse society such as India (with obvious parallels with Iraq’s own diverse society and post-colonial heritage), the state may choose to constitutionally support the emancipation of women but rely on religiously enshrined texts to administrate matters of divorce, marriage and inheritance practices. Whilst taking control of all other areas of the colonized society, the British ceded control over the private realm to religious authorities. Thus the colonialists encouraged retroactive policies towards gender reform, because progressive policies were perceived to be in contravention with the “culture” and “traditions” of the societies that they governed. As a result, the patronised government was supposed to administrate using British “advisors” in nearly all other areas. The areas of control that were ceded to British power include the Interior, Finance, Justice and Defense ministries, as well as public works, irrigation, police, health and education, whilst its legitimacy was secured by being seen to employ a “hands-off” approach when it came to women and the family.

Whilst the emergence of an independent Indian democratic state in 1946 and Ba’athist rule in the 1970s under Saddam Hussein would seem diametrically opposed, I would argue that parallel state strategies towards gender policies are reflected by both countries’ post-colonial heritage, ‘since most of the British officials who came with the

125 Keating, (2007)
forces (to Iraq) had been trained in India, a civil administration on Indian lines was set up.\textsuperscript{126} On similar lines Muhsin al-Musawi has argued:

The Indian nexus should be taken more seriously in any reading of Iraqi culture in the first decades of the century, for although it gave way in mid-war years to ardent nationalism and direct engagement with Arab, American and European thought, its pre-nascent era centered on two factors: the geographical connection through the Arabian Gulf, with its commercial and human flowing, and the colonial proxy, for the British empire had India as its experimental laboratory for future expansion.\textsuperscript{127}

The compromises implemented by British administration were strategically engineered to bargain power away from select groups of masculinities by ensuring that private law remained in the hands of a perceived Iraqi culture whilst economic and political power was administrated through a British colonial model. As Jacqueline and Shereen Ismael have noted, the British administration governing Iraq was fiercely opposed to educating girls because of its perception of the local population’s attitude towards such an enterprise. Thus it is in spite of British colonialism rather than because of it, that women’s education began to develop in Iraq.\textsuperscript{128} This compromise that the British implemented under colonial rule maintained its currency in later years under Ba’ath rule. Whilst maintaining women (or at least the status of women) needed to be modernised because the Ba’ath sought to replace the extended family as the predominant tie of loyalty, they were unwilling to upset the balance of male power within the nuclear family, the nation’s most important economic and procreative unit. Whilst the participation of women in the public sphere was an economic necessity during the labour shortage in the 1970s and, later during the Iran-Iraq War, these gains were undermined by the retention of an ahistorical religious dimension in the 1978 personal status laws. In 1978, though personal status law was modified, these changes were modest, and except for the reformulation of the concept of zina which was reconceptualised as khiyana zujiyya and the elimination of forced marriages, the code emphasised that:

\textsuperscript{126} al-Ali, p.10  
\textsuperscript{127} al-Musawi, p. 99  
The unified code applies to all Iraqi citizens of the Muslim faith. It should be noted that *qadis* (judges) have the right to refer to Hanafi or Ja’afari\textsuperscript{129} rules in cases where they deem the law to be inadequate or inappropriate. In 1978, the Ba’ath promulgated an amended Code of Personal Status, or *Qanun al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiya*. In the preamble, the Code states that the new amendments are based on ‘the principles of the Islamic Shari’a, but only those suited to the spirit of today, and on legal precedents set in Iraqi courts, especially the High Court and on the principles of justice’.\textsuperscript{130}

The contract narrative which Keating discusses in relation to the emergence of the Indian state compromised any commitments to egalitarian gender policies with the need to ‘secure fraternal acquiescence to centralized rule’:\textsuperscript{131} equal access to the public sphere was established but discriminatory policies towards women in the private realm sanctioned.

This is not to assume that all Iraqi men necessarily adopted a hegemonic position when it came to enacting power over women but rather indicates that the state officially entrenched hegemonic masculine practices through religious rhetoric. Ba’athist Iraq certainly needed women’s allegiance but at the same time remained ambivalent about how far reforms should go and, furthermore, it was cautious about provoking adverse reactions to women’s liberation. As a result, women’s legislation was compromised by two opposing forces—the first being their symbolic status as a vessel for cultural authenticity with regards to Iraq’s status as an Arabo-Islamic culture, and the second being their metaphorical status as a symbol for national advancement and modernisation. A conflict clearly illustrated in Betool Khedairi’s novel *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!!* as her protagonist is caught between the contradictions of being a modern Westernised woman contributing to the war effort and following her passion to be a ballet dancer, and her status as an Iraqi woman who embodies traditional virtues promulgated by her father.

While women’s public status was enhanced through educational and labour reforms, as well as being promoted through institutions such as the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), their private status remained grounded in religious personal law with only minor changes to women’s private legal status. Indeed, when Suad Joseph

\textsuperscript{129} Ja’afari is a term that was employed by the Ba’ath for its Shi’a majority
\textsuperscript{130} Rassam, p. 94
\textsuperscript{131} Keating, p.131
conducted her field work in 1970s she observed that in response to the amended personal status law:

GFIW leaders seemed ambivalent or disappointed with the modesty of these reforms. However, they were quick to rationalise, to their members and to me, the reluctance of the Ba’th to make more radical reforms in terms of the necessity of placating the religious conservatives. Several GFIW leaders told me that whilst they personally would have preferred a direct secularisation of personal status laws (including the outlawing of polygyny), the selective merger of Sunni and Shi’a laws allowed them to claim legitimacy of the Shari’a and this enabled them to maneuver around the clerics.132

It was not uncommon for the Ba’ath to appropriate different political and religious discourses in order to constantly reaffirm their legitimacy and hegemonic status as the unifying head of an Iraqi state, as opposed to an affiliate of one of the many sectarian and religious groups. An example of this is the framing of national progress (including women’s emancipation) in religiously loaded terms, describing the Iraqi nation as moving from *jahiliyya* to *umma*133 or Saddam Hussein’s frequent appearances in a variety of local dress, army attire and participation in Shi’a religious ceremonies. The goal for national harmony was cemented by a schizophrenic assertion of national unity showing each group that Saddam Hussein was their legitimate representative.134 This was no different from the Ba’athist stance on gender issues. Whilst on the one hand an image of modernity was projected onto women and the progress of the nation was measured by the perceived level of their emancipation, the need to define the nation state at war in militarised terms meant that women were presented as something that need to be protected. With the press both (at least before 1986) projecting images of female militancy and women as the symbol of the homeland, women occupied an ambivalent position. As a result, a contradictory relationship existed between women as symbols of land, motherhood and traditionalism, which the Ba’ath used to draw out horizontal comradeship between men from different sectarian groups; and women as valued members of modern labour force, crucial to the Ba’ath if they were to succeed in releasing and mobilising droves of male labour onto the frontline.

132 Joseph, p.184
134 Makiya, p.115
Assessments of the status of women in Ba’athist Iraq, such as those by Amal Rassam and Suad Joseph, give little attention to masculinity in this era. In fact, it is implied that men and masculinities are complicit in the subordination of women, without assessment of the differing statuses of men. Achim Rohde critiques scholars like Rassam, because in talking about women she implies ‘the existence of an ultimate cultural core that links all Iraqis together, temporal, spatial and social stratification notwithstanding: the eternal Iraqi masculine.”

The assumption by Rassam (and other scholars such as Jacqueline Ismael) that the status of Iraqi women can be understood through patriarchal frameworks, presupposes that men automatically benefitted from the state as much as they undermined women’s progress. In fact the social changes that swept across Iraq from the beginning of the twentieth century, and which continued through the 1970s and 1980s, were to affect men as much as they affected women. Little attention, however, is given to the status of men and the changes that were made to their lives during the 1970s and 1980s. The shift from kinship to individual mediation with the state through the propagation and the emergence of modern, urbanised citizenry in Iraq was to affect men from different social classes and ethnic groups in a variety of ways.

With the growing power of the state and its extraordinary intervention into the lives of its people, it adversely affected the ability of the majority of its citizens, not just women, in determining the direction of social change. The inability of citizens to enact and influence social change was in part due to the enormous bureaucracy financed by the Ba’ath to run Iraq. One fifth of Iraqi citizens during the Ba’ath regime were employed by this massive state apparatus; this was to have two important outcomes for the state and its citizenry. Firstly, it served as an effective method of reducing unemployment, even if it meant under-employment was rife. Secondly and most importantly, as a large proportion of the population was economically reliant on the state for their livelihoods, this group was unlikely to manifest political opposition or become involved in social reform. As the majority of state employees were men (the total proportion of women working for the state had only reached 15.4 per cent by 1977), these wide-ranging social ramifications of labour organisation mainly affected men.

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135 Rohde, p. 186
137 Ismael, p.191
This, by proxy, meant that dissent was almost impossible for one-fifth of the population. Furthermore, in an atmosphere of deep social suspicion, where the wrong comment could endanger the whole of one’s family’s economic livelihood, men suffered increased social risk from the state.

Similarly, the opportunities for men to access and exercise political power were limited by ethnic and social stratification. By 1968, the Ba’ath party was almost exclusively dominated by Sunnis from Tikrit, enhancing ethnic and religious dimensions to power that were at odds with Hussein’s rhetoric of Iraqi nationalism: ‘out of the total of fifty-three members of the top command that led the party from November 1963 to 1970, 84.9 per cent were Sunni Arabs, 5.7 per cent Shi’a Arabs, and 7.5 per cent Kurds, whereas for the period 1952-November 1963, the comparable figures were 38.5; 53.8; and 7.7 per cent.’

As the political landscape closed down opposition and the Iraqi economy’s fiscal gaps were closed by the booming oil industry, Iraqi society by the 1970s had become modernised and urbanised. In this Hanna Batatu has observed that:

> Perhaps no process has affected, through manifold and intricate mediate causes, the life of Iraqis more enduringly than the gradual tying up of their country in the course of the nineteenth and present centuries to a world market anchored on big industry and their involvement in the web of forces or the consequences of forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution.

Despite these profound social and economic changes in Iraqi society, analyses of Iraqi masculinity have remained entrenched in the framework of patriarchy to explain its relationship with the family and the state. Jacqueline Ismael and Shereen Ismael have offered this definition of patriarchy in Iraq:

> The concept of patriarchy generally refers to the empowerment of males over females in the social organisation of everyday life. Modern patriarchy may be defined as a system of male privilege in the social order that functions as a recompense to men for their disempowerment vis-à-vis the state. The principle of male sacrifice for the state and female sacrifice for the family, symbolized in different ways by different cultures in terms honor, duty, love, and so on, is a cornerstone of the modern nation-state system.

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138 Batatu, p. 1078
139 Batatu, p.1113
140 Ismael, p. 285
This definition is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it assumes that all men have power over all women at all times, an over-arching generalisation rather than a nuanced understanding of masculine experience in Iraq. The concept of patriarchy assumes that all men are patriarchs who uniformly interact with the state and each other equally. Secondly, whilst this is an account of male power in the modern nation state it does not take into account how men relate to other men, instead it focuses solely on men’s relationship with women. This male/female relationship changed considerably in the space of the three decades which witnessed a transition from a tribal, rural patriarchy to an individualised, urbanised and militarised citizenry based on fraternity rather than patriarchy. Despite this fundamental upheaval, accounts of Iraqi women’s experience are always couched in patriarchal terminology where Ba’athist gender policies are concerned; these policies are simultaneously criticised for both undermining and consolidating male power. The two competing visions of the Ba’ath, from Makiya and Rassam respectively, of going too far and yet not far enough with regards to its gender policies, summarise the debate on gendered roles in Iraqi society during the 1970s and 1980s.

Ba’thism’s radicalism lies in its willingness to harness the power accumulated through this kind of organisation to break down cherished boundaries taken for granted by society. Consider the chilling implications of these words by Saddam Hussein on the private, hitherto inviolable world of the Arab family.¹⁴¹

The extreme caution and moderation exhibited by the regime in this area may be partly explained by the reluctance of the government to provoke more conservative elements of the establishment, who could conceivably mobilise a following on the issue of women. It is suggested here, however, that reasons go much deeper than that and involve a basic dilemma, one which was shared throughout the Islamic world- the Iraqi leadership seemed to entertain a basic ambivalence with regard to the role of women and their ‘proper place’ in society.¹⁴² Much of the research on gender relations in Iraq under the Ba’ath regime focuses on these legislative reforms to women’s status and draws a variety of conclusions from them as to the success of the Ba’ath’s legislation on the status of Iraqi women. Whilst Kanan Makiya envisions Ba’athist intervention into the family sphere as a frightening example of totalitarian power, Amal Rassam, Suad Joseph and Noga Efrati offer assessments which simultaneously show

¹⁴¹ Makiya, p. 77
¹⁴² Rassam, p. 97
that the Ba’ath only went as far as was needed to restructure families away from tribal groupings whilst being caught between striving for modernity and imagining women as an essential marker for cultural authenticity. All of these assessments, however, tend to frame a singular hegemonic masculinity into a single narrative of patriarchal domination. Indeed, men, just like women, were constantly bargaining and making compromises with the state in order to carve out their own social spaces. In this context, just as Suad Joseph argues, ‘the advantages citizens received from the state were represented less as rights of citizenship, and more as the benefits of loyalty to the head of the party and state. State building and personal clientage were closely intertwined.’

**Gendered Roles in the Iran-Iraq War**

Despite the enormous social upheavals that spread throughout Iraqi society in the 1970s, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War was to signal yet more changes. The war was to sweep up women in the contradictory demands of supplying labour, whilst simultaneously being the repositories of an Iraqi identity; At the same time, men were faced with large and devastating changes to their status as a whole generation of men born in the sixties and seventies were sent to the frontline and nearly every family experienced the loss of a family member. The experience of women in this period was on the home front: as Noga Efrati has put it, being pulled between productive and reproductive roles. Men were, likewise, facing equally divergent experiences of Iraq at war. Even though wars are fought in the main by men, not all men participate in them; a situation that generates ambivalent positions for those men who are not soldiers. This was particularly significant as an important aspect of Ba’ath-inspired Iraqi Nationalism was its inherent militarism. The expansion of the military in Iraq during the 1970s meant that it became a key site for national cohesion and the construction of hegemonic masculinity. The prestige given to the army was to have important consequences for social organisation in Iraq. Whilst Iraqi masculinity has been analysed through patriarchal frameworks which are inherently bound to

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143 Joseph, p.179
145 Rohde, p.188
generational power, bellicose masculinity associated with the military affords legitimacy and prestige to younger, more physically-able men. As such, the older generation were disempowered as the physical ability of the younger generation to defend and fulfil national narratives of Iraqi manliness eclipsed the notion of older men possessing power in public and private roles over both women and younger men.

The elderly, men of different ethnic groups, opposition members and male children too young to participate in the war were excluded from militarised representations of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, they were forced to occupy positions which identified with militarised masculinity, and gave prestige to it, without being able to place themselves within this narrative. These ambivalent positions occupied by non-hegemonic masculinities (though not all male soldiers necessarily occupied this position either) were reinforced by the discourse of the state through a media which indicated that ‘a gendered hierarchy of social status was being reinforced in the press during this period, with men/soldiers at its top and women/civilians confined to auxiliary positions.’ Accordingly, the simple binary between a male soldier and a female civilian does not truly reflect the experience and representation of Iraqi masculinities in wartime. Whilst wartime provides men with an opportunity to enhance their masculinity, to reinforce stability of this concept of self-identification in ways impossible under the ‘constraints of civilian life,’ this does not mean that all men seek to adhere to this model. In fact, during the war both sides printed testimonies from real soldiers about their life at the front, many of which showed the real physical and psychological strain of fighting. Whilst the state continued to promote a bellicose, jingoist masculinity, soldiers returning from the front who were psychologically and physically disabled from their experiences articulated gaps in the state’s romanticised vision of men fighting and dying for their country.

Just as the state sought to create a cohesive narrative of militarised masculinity and thus a constructed framework for “Iraqiness”, it also became increasingly suspicious of Iraq’s heterogeneous population. Despite the regime’s attempts to underline a unified Iraqi identity through propaganda, the Ba’ath discriminated against the diverse peoples which composed its citizenry and whom it was trying so hard to homogenise. The Kurds in the north of Iraq were subject to systematic intimidation, warfare and, later,
acts of genocide by the regime, which viewed them as a threat to the integrity of Iraq. The use of chemical weapons against the Iraqi Kurdish population in Halabcha and later the Anfal campaign demonstrates the extent to which the Ba’ath regime viewed elements of its citizenry with suspicion. The gendered lines along which these brutal campaigns were conducted resulted in the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of people, mainly younger men. This is demonstrated clearly in Jacqueline Ismael’s description of the Anfal campaign\(^\text{149}\), (adapted from the Commission on Human Rights in 1994), which clearly delineates which sections of society posed the greatest threat to the Ba’athist regime. Throughout the Anfal campaign, from 23 February 1988 to 9 June 1988, Iraqi forces moved through the Iraqi Kurdish region attacking Kurdish villages. The human rights commission employed the categories of men, women and children, and elderly, to examine the fate of the victims. Whilst women, children and the elderly underwent experiences ranging from no effect, capture, disappearance, resettlement to a period of detainment in prisons, the fate of Kurdish younger men was nearly universally capture and disappearance. The fact that the classificatory formulation assigns no gender to the elderly and children is worthy of note: it was men, above all, young, adult men, who were perceived to pose the greatest threat to the status quo. It is clear then that the regime dealt brutally with masculinities that occupied ambiguous positions in relation to the Ba’ath regime, particularly those from minority or subaltern groups. This was not just the case for the Kurds. Similar divisive strategies against other subaltern groups were adopted along both religious and nationalist lines where men were viewed as the the primary supporters or opposition to the Ba’ath.

Whilst the majority of Iraq’s population who adhered to Twelver Shi’ism were not subjected to open attack, an Iraqi nationalist identity coupled with a religious identity shared with Iran became a source of tension for a mainly Sunni regime. Shi’a communities inside of Iraq were viewed as potential Iranian fifth columnists who sought to undermine the integrity of the Iraqi nation.\(^\text{150}\)As a result, waves of expulsions took place: Iraqi citizens suspected of being of Iranian origin were sent “back” to Iran. This was particularly problematic given that many Shi’a Arabs had taken up Iranian citizenship at the beginning of the twentieth century to avoid conscription into the

\(^\text{149}\) Ismael, pp. 185-211
\(^\text{150}\) Makiya, p.19
Ottoman army\textsuperscript{151} and had passed down their “inauthentic” citizenship status to later generations. In addition to these “inauthentic” citizens, the expulsions included 40,000 Shi’a Kurds and other ordinary citizens who were accused of having obtained Iraqi nationality illegally in order to harm Iraqi national interests. In addition to these policies, the state offered $8000 to ‘any Iraqi who divorced his Iranian wife,’\textsuperscript{152} as well as conducting frequent round ups and imprisonment of Shi’as who were accused of being Iranian spies.

At the same time Shi’a religious narratives were being appropriated in place of nationalist narratives to address and motivate soldiers on the front line. This was implemented in order to combat Iranian religious narratives, which spoke not only to Iran’s Shi’a population but also as a result the majority of Iraq’s own population. These policies culminated in fragmenting the Iraqi population along even more sharply defined sectarian lines, just as the regime was attempting to underline the Iraqi identity as its citizens’ primary identification.

However, the process of secularization that had taken place since 1968 should not be omitted from any analysis of Iraqi citizenship, despite the obvious of attraction of emphasising a Shi’a majority versus a Sunni ruling minority under the Ba’ath, as Ofra Bengio has noted: ‘Shiis [sic] have not been exempt from the broad process of secularization that has taken place across the Middle East.’\textsuperscript{153} Indeed, whilst the narratives of nationalism are a recurring concern of the Iraqi literature in this study, religion, by comparison, takes a back-seat. It is, therefore, no surprise that of the two authors interviewed as part of the research for this study, Lutfiyya al-Dulaimi\textsuperscript{154} and Betool Khedairi,\textsuperscript{155} both refused to identify themselves religiously or along sectarian lines, but instead drew attention to their Iraqi, rather than religious, identity. The multi-faceted and often incoherent narratives employed by the Ba’ath operated to create a schizophrenic yet coherent Iraqi identity, by promoting a secular state which could incorporate a multitude of religious identities.

Not only were men losing their lives on the front line but they also occupied a precarious position under a regime which viewed the majority of the Iraqi population

\textsuperscript{151} Chehabi, p.25
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, p.25
\textsuperscript{153} Bengio, p. 98
\textsuperscript{154} al-Dulaimi, interviewed by Jennifer Chandler
\textsuperscript{155} Khedairi, interviewed by Jennifer Chandler
with deep suspicion. Vast swathes of the male population were conscripted to fight the war on the front and as the war progressed the population serving in the armed forces grew from 1.7 per cent to 17 per cent. Not only did the war contribute to the deterioration of rural peasants communities in Iraq (something that had been happening before the beginning of the war), it also took its toll on the urban male working class:

Workers were frequently forced to accept pay cuts of up to 20 per cent or more, work much longer hours, and holidays for the same wages, have their pay withheld by the state, waive their vacation, purchase governments bonds, work in increasingly unsafe conditions, and pay special wartime income taxes. Some workers were also subjected to direct repression, including torture and execution...Many labourers were conscripted into the military.

In the early years of the war there was an urgent need to replace the male workforce in factories, in order to keep the national production line going. The Iraqi regime had not planned for a long war, relying on what it had hoped to be a blitzkrieg; as such by 1982 the work force had reduced by 40 per cent. Initially, the government relied upon foreign workers to fill this gap and then later used the GFIW to try and mobilise the female population into the labour force. This was not entirely successful. It was fraught with problems as a lack of coherent strategy, attitudes of institutions towards the GFIW and to women’s employment in general meant that women’s participation in the production line never really materialised in a meaningful way.

However, by 1986 representations of women’s role were beginning to shift from a fully mobilised female citizen to a more reproductive role. This was partly because a war that had been predicted to last for a few weeks had in fact been going on for six years and the numerical superiority of the Iranian population caused Saddam to call on women to bolster the population. In order to do this, Saddam took several U-turns in his emancipation policies including restricting abortions and contraceptives. In addition to this, in 1986 the Revolutionary Command Council had adopted policies to encourage women to resign their jobs and these were augmented further by 1987. Following this, Hussein’s meeting with the GFIW in 1987 emphasised that every family must have five children and the GFIW was directed to appeal to women to

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156 Rohde, p. 189
157 Workman, p. 158
158 For a detailed discussion of this please refer to Noga Efrati’s article, ‘Productive or reproductive? Women during the Iran-Iraq War’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35:3, (1999) 27-44
increase the population. The GFIW was expected to encourage families with no children or with a limited number of children to seek treatment in a special centre.\textsuperscript{159}

Despite significant changes in the representation of women’s roles and rights in Iraqi society during the 1970s and 1980s, together with amendments to personal status laws during this time, wartime contingencies demonstrated that there had been no real transformation of women’s legal status from the 1959 personal status law which clearly assigned productive and reproductive roles to men and women respectively. Personal status laws had really consolidated the rights of the husband rather than emancipating his wife, as Ahmad al-Kubaysi, a university lecturer in the Faculty of Law at Baghdad University had written:

A husband’s rights are not only the obedience of his wife but also that she live in the matrimonial home. That she was to dwell in the home he had prepared for her had a distinct purpose, namely to give birth to and care for his children.\textsuperscript{160}

Not only were women being driven back into the home in order to produce the next generation, those who chose to remain in work were often paid a fraction of the wages earned by male workers.\textsuperscript{161}

Just as women’s role was being shaped by their reproductive capability, the prolonged war affected men’s role in the private realm as well, especially for subaltern i.e. non-hegemonic groups. Deserters’ wives and children were arrested and special grants were distributed to men who married war widows.\textsuperscript{162} Whilst the regime promoted a militarised masculinity and used its propaganda machines to associate fighting for the homeland with duty, honour, and defending “womenandchildren”\textsuperscript{163} the majority of men did not fit this description. Thus, while Iraq’s specific gender policies are easily identifiable, the gendered political discourse of Ba’athist Iraq in this period is often over-looked. The fate of its subaltern groups and the coherency of Iraqi identity were based on the nation’s conception of its male population as militarised, active soldiers, side-lining and silencing subaltern groups. As such the importance of defining and delineating the contexts for these texts is paramount during a discussion of Iran-Iraq

\textsuperscript{159} Efrati, p. 36
\textsuperscript{160} Efrati, p. 37
\textsuperscript{161} Workman, p. 161
\textsuperscript{162} Ismael, p. 198
\textsuperscript{163} Cynthia Enloe’s term developed in \textit{Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics}, (London: Pandora, 1989)
War fiction. Given that the novels and collection of short-stories in this study indicate that distinctive literary conventions relating to, emerged out of, and are shaped by, specific political contexts, it is important to outline these contexts in order to fully understand the external influences working on representations within the texts. Just as Ba’athist Iraq created ambiguous and conflicting narratives of how gender should operate in Iraqi society (and consequently the breaks in these narratives which lacked universal application), a familiar and discontinuous narrative of gender and society emerged in post-revolutionary Iran.

2.4: SOCIO-POLITICAL NARRATIVES OF GENDER IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

The Islamic revolution of 1978-1979 ushered in a new era of women’s role in the public and private sphere of Iranian society. Contrary to the wide-spread belief that an Islamic revolution would simply return women to their traditional roles and beleaguer women’s rights even further, the Islamic revolution of 1979 offered a very different and almost unexpected vision of gender regimes in the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran. There can be no doubt that Khomeini’s regime sharply reversed the gains made by women prior to the revolution, particularly those gains which benefitted middle- and upper-class women. However, as the war with Iraq became more prolonged and the Islamic government sought to narrate a clear ideological vision for its citizens (a vision which was by its very nature inherently gendered), a different class of women emerged as possessing power within this politically Islamic society. In addition to this, as women’s movements have played a key role in establishing an Islamic government, they had a clear and unifying cause around which to rally, and were finally able to clarify their objectives independent of other political opposition, particularly the left, which had previously subordinated and ultimately side-lined women’s concerns to their own larger political aims.

Prior to the revolution which deposed the Pahlavi monarchy, the status of women suffered some of the same contradictions as its Iraqi counter-part. Women’s role in society became a marker of both a progressive modern nation and symbolic of traditional, cultural and religious identities, as the Pahlavi monarchy embarked on a programme of modernisation and westernisation. As in Iraq, the promotion of

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women’s role in society was seen as a necessity for developing the nation. Throughout the fifty-four years of the Pahlavi monarchy three initiatives stand out as being the most significant to the status of Iranian women. The first of these was the banning of the chador in 1936; the second was the granting of suffrage to women in 1963; and the third, and perhaps the most significant of the three, was the 1967 legislation entitled the Family Protection Law, which extended women’s rights within the family and prevented men from being able to divorce their wives at will and made it increasingly more difficult for them to engage in polygyny. Whilst the 1967 law was promoted as a significant step in the protection of women’s rights in the family, it was not nearly as radical as it proclaimed itself to be. Just as the regime in Iraq had maintained a family code based in religious doctrine whilst pursuing Western style modernisation in all other areas, a similar pattern was followed by the Shah in Iran. This pattern of ceding family law to religious authority, whilst pursuing secular policies in all other areas, is again reminiscent of the post-colonial sexual contract outlined by Christine Keating. Though Iran was never directly colonised by external powers, the Shah ‘continued the same pattern of political repression, social modernization, and capitulation to Western interference. Western intervention in Iran’s internal affairs reached its height in the 1940s and 1950s.’

Unlike the heterogeneous population of Iraq, the vast majority of the Iran’s population was and remains religiously Shi’a: thus the doctrines pertaining to the regulation of family law were unilaterally based in Shi’a religious codes and conformed, as did earlier legislation, to the rules outlined in the Ithna Ashari Shi’a doctrines. Thus despite placing restrictions on polygyny, the Iranian Civil Code continued to allow a man an unlimited number of temporary wives (or mut’a marriages), a union which offered far fewer rights than a full marriage contract. As such, though the ‘Family Protection Law of 1967 bent the doctrines of Ithna Ashari...[it was] very cautious not to break away from it completely.’

166 Vatandoust, p. 107
167 Nahid Yeganeh, ‘Women, Nationalism and Islam in Contemporary Political Discourse in Iran,’ Feminist Review, 44 (Summer 1993) 3-18 (p.5)
168 Vatandoust, p.119
However, despite the cautious approach to marital rights the monarchy did institute more progressive gender policies, insisting on mass education, which created a solid female middle class whose social mobility was predicated on education. Women were therefore able to strive for and obtain higher educational opportunities in Iranian society even if women’s rights were gained incrementally.

It is vital to note that though these changes were unpopular with the more traditional classes in Iranian society, there was no move to rescind these policies after the revolution. In fact, quite the opposite came about. One of the major problems with the Pahlavi reforms was that they were never able to escape the rhetoric of western emulation. Instead modernisation became synonymous with westernisation in common public perception. Integral to the Shah’s policies on gender reform was reducing the power of the clergy and destabilising its traditional power base. As such the clergy were able to argue that the Pahlavis sought to emulate Western society rather than forging a distinct form of Iranian modernism. Inevitably, the unpopularity of these reforms, particularly with the clergy and their power base, was another spur towards revolutionary action. One of the most interesting consequences of the Islamic revolution was that it swept away the divisions between secular and religious legislation. As the new regime embarked on a wholesale programme of societal Islamization, the newly inscribed family codes which enshrined women’s secondary status at the same time allowed a new brand of Islamic feminism to emerge as a home-grown movement to challenge these codes. This challenge has however been represented problematically in the texts analysed here. As the reader encounters new modes of female power enshrined in religious discourse by the state, in novels like Ahmad Mahmud’s Zamin-i Sukhtah, these women are shown to be incapable of wielding the power which the state has granted to them within rigid politically Islamic frameworks. As such the novel critiques the state for empowering women in order to bolster its own support base.

**Gender and the Islamic State**

Once the revolution had established an Islamic government, many assumed that women’s role in society would be entirely restructured and revert back to and enshrine the domesticity of women’s life roles.
Following the revolution everything which remained from the pre-revolutionary time was rejected... Under the pretext that the West and its model is evil, women were dismissed from the administrative system, and home was considered the best place for them...

At the outset, these fears were confirmed by the annulment of the 1967 Family Protection Law, making the wearing of the veil mandatory and the reducing of the legal age of marriage for girls from fifteen to nine years old. Whilst these moves incited a general move towards ‘granting more power over women’s sexuality and reproductive functions to the state and to men’, it should not be read as a reversal or attack on ‘modern trends in love and marriage, as Janet Afary contends.’ 169 Whilst the actions of legislators in Iran were seen to undermine the modern, progressive nuclear family unit through the lifting of restrictions on polygyny, the reality was that though these laws were passed they were not widely utilised, particularly not among the urban, middle class population; and most Iranian families would consider sigheh marriages no better than legalised prostitution. This is the first of a number of examples that demonstrates a divergence between social norms and legislative policies. In contrast to Afary’s assertion that the Islamic Republic set about reversing modern trends of love and marriage 171 it actually ended up consolidating this trend or at least created no coherent counter-discourse that rejected or suggested that the regime opposed it. The Islamic Republic did not forge itself as being based on a necessarily counter-modern revolution but rather it attempted to rewrite its own version of Islamic modernity onto its citizens.

When the Islamic revolution first attempted to purge the country of Western elements, they conflated anything “modern” with “Western,” as most modern technology was at the time produced by the West. Now the idea of “modern” has been redefined as something that is also Islamic. 172

Despite the regressive reforms made to women’s legal status, the public presence of women and the new opportunities opened up to women from lower social classes led to some extraordinary and unprecedented societal changes. In many ways, the new

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170 Afary, p.265
171 Afary, p.265
172 Varzi, p. 123
Islamic Republic empowered a different group of women as opposed to categorically denying the rights of all women. Whilst religious, conservative women were the demographic that was most likely to suffer from a change in family status laws, since they tended to be from poorer backgrounds, the reality was that the regime empowered Islamist women, in order to bolster its support base.

A young Islamist woman could now stand up to her family and demand to go to university, to become active in an Islamist organization, to join the literacy, health or reconstruction programs, to enlist in the women’s auxiliary branch of the Basij. Also known as the Basiji Sisters, to support the war effort, or even choose her husband through such contacts rather than submit to an arranged marriage.\(^{173}\)

For the first time, women from the more traditional classes were empowered to act outside of the family unit: ‘Contrary to expectations by secular forces, the Islamic state did not prevent women from engaging in education. Indeed, women’s education was considered an important strategy for the Islamisation of society.’\(^{174}\) In fact between 1980 and 1986 education received around 20% of government expenditure.\(^{175}\) Other factors, such as segregation and mandatory veiling persuaded traditional families that it was morally safe to send their daughters to school and university because education was now grounded in an Islamic ethos and conducted in an Islamic environment. Even if the Islamic Republic’s motives were ‘to fill schools and universities with its female supporters to counteract the influence of the secular middle classes,’\(^{176}\) what was achieved was education for a far broader social range of women.

Likewise, men from lower socio-economic, traditional classes were also able to engage with politics and the state in a new way, as the traditional and conservative working classes became important players in representing the vision of a revolutionary Islamic regime. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War was to be an unheralded opportunity for the newly formed theocracy. Firstly, it allowed the regime to consolidate its hold on power, as a fragile and fragmented revolutionary Iran was united against an Iraqi aggressor. Secondly, the war allowed the regime to delineate a clear vision of an Islamic citizen orientated around its young male supporters. The war and defence of

\(^{173}\) Afary, p. 295  
\(^{174}\) Yeganeh, p. 11  
\(^{176}\) Yeganeh, p. 12
the nation was cast in unashamedly religious terminology; the regime particularly
drawing on and using Karbala as a site of religious cohesion. Not only was this to make
the war a religious cause (thereby consolidating the legitimacy of the regime still
further) but it also allowed a mass mobilization of men from outside of traditional
military structures. There can be no doubt that the regime was taken unawares by
Saddam Hussein’s invasion, particularly as the army had been savagely purged after
the fall of the Shah. As a result ‘instead of training an army, Khomeini armed the
people. He claimed that if the people could not save the nation, it was not worth
saving. Soon, the memory of Shah-Yazid was replaced by the new enemy: Saddam-
Yazid.’

Central to this vision was the construction of masculinity and youth as religiously
sanctioned defenders of the nation. As Shahin Gerami has noted: ‘revolutionary
discourse in Iran sprouted two distinct but very masculine fronts: the urban guerrilla
and the clergy.’ The gendered discourses of the Islamic Republic of Iran revolved
mainly around presenting men within a discourse of Shi’a religious narratives,
particularly those connected with the martyrdom of Hussein by Caliph Yazid.
Shuhada’ and the act of shahadat came to dominate public space. The cultural scene
and public space was dominated by the images of these young men: their images
adorned huge billboards across the country. Streets were named after them and the
house of a family whose son has been martyred was marked out from the rest of those
on the street. In addition to this, public ceremonies and spectacles in the month of
Muharram demarcated the importance of the mythology of Imam Hussein and
inspired boys to follow in his footsteps. The idealisation of a Shi’a Islamic masculinity,
based on Imam Hussein’s qualities as a virtuous (and virginal) warrior battling the
infidel, as well as religious and nationalist rhetoric which cast Saddam Hussein as
Yazid reborn, encouraged young men to volunteer on mass to serve as Basiji. Whilst
the outside world was shocked by images of boys as young as ten marching out onto
the battlefield, the state nurtured a unique relationship between sons, the state and
their mothers. War widows (which also include mothers of martyrs) became

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177 Varzi, p. 55
178 Gerami, (2003), p. 262
179 Shahin Gerami, ‘Islamist Masculinity and Muslim Masculinities’ in Handbook of Studies on Men and
(p.452)
numerous enough to constitute their own social group, and develop into a distinct category of Islamic citizen, which the state was keen to promote. The relationship between the mother and the martyred son was idealised by the state as personal loss turned ‘into political gain and status achieved through a tragic death.” Posters, which span the entire length of high-rise buildings in Tehran, show pictures of these mothers with captions decreeing: “I do love my sons but I love martyrdom more.” Not only was their sacrifice honoured and reified by the state in cultural terms, but economically the benefits offered to Iranian veterans and martyr survivors allowed this set of women to carve out their own economic independence. Indeed this new group of empowered and honoured women can be seen in a wide range of Iranian war novels. In novels analysed in this study empowered female characters such as Naneh Baran in *Zamin-i Sukhtah*, Maryam Jazayari in *Zamastan-i ’62* and Getty in Habib Ahmadzadeh’s novel, *Shatranj ba Mashin-i Qiyamat* demonstrate their social and economic independence through widowhood. Additionally, women like Nasser’s mother in *Safar bāh Garay 270 Darajah*, are shackled to domesticity in traditional family arrangements in which the father rules the household.

Previously, social empowerment for lower class religious women would have been unheard of, who like Mahmud’s female character Naneh Baran, mainly came from traditional and low socio-economic backgrounds. The integral relationship between the mother and her martyred son or husband that was mediated and promoted by the state not only constituted an idealisation of womanhood but also eclipsed patrilineal narratives of the Islamic family.

Recognizing the mother’s ultimate sacrifice, the state honoured them above fathers in war posters and placards. Hence the Basiji son and his mother gained ascendancy over the Father in regime propaganda. If the son lived, he received many veterans’ benefits from the state, and he and his mother exercised new authority over the household. If he died, his mother was compensated as a war widow. In either case, the mother’s identity altered and she exhibited a new sense of entitlement from society."

Thus the state became the provider for war veterans, widows and their families, creating an Islamic public space which elided the role of the father and created a new

181 Zahedi, p. 273
182 Afary, p. 299
dynamic in the private sphere. The conditions of war created idealised prototypes of masculinity which narrated a vision of Islamic citizenry based on ideal mothers and warrior sons guided by the wise and religious hand of the clergy. This corresponds with Roxanne Varzi’s observations that the regime promoted a culture of death and martyrdom which not only would channel revolutionary fervour, mobilise the masses and consolidate the regime’s power but also narrate the ideal citizen: one who gives up his life for his country in the name of Islam. 

As such, a fissure emerged, prising the Islamic narrative from the reality of life within the narrative which Gerami entitles Mullahs, Martyrs and Men, or what I prefer to term: Mullahs, Martyrs and other masculinities. Even for war veterans who were an integral part of the state’s social and political fabric, the end of their military service has often found them struggling with the state’s narrative of ideal masculinity. Despite the generous compensation packages awarded to war veterans, long-term and severely disabled ex-soldiers, they have had difficulty coping with the emasculating effects of disability. The state glorified martyrs rather than injured soldiers and, as such, those soldiers who returned from the front with severe disabilities have not been accorded the same prestige by the state as the dead. Despite the benefits offered by the state the shift from active wartime roles to that of a dependent, disabled civilian has resulted in a deepening identity crisis for men who have previously been the subjects and performers of an Iranian wartime hegemonic masculinity. In a medical study of Iranian war veterans who suffered from sulphur mustard poisoning during the war, all reported to suffer from severe social isolation, a sense of alienation, depression, loss of family unity, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. This is attributed to the fact that retired war veterans were ‘important and effective people before acquiring a disability as a result of SM toxicity. These individuals do not like to interact and have relationships with people who do not perceive them as a whole person but rather perceive them as being sick.’ The discourse of hegemonic masculinity issued by the state made it difficult for veterans, particularly those disabled by the war, to realign their peacetime roles, as death and martyrdom continued to be at the centre of the

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state’s discourse on masculinity. Writing of these men’s struggles to cope with a transition of identity, Roxanne Varzi observes that ‘it is not surprising that as an aftermath of the war, even the most religious war veterans have become opium and heroin addicts.’

The social effects of the Islamic regime’s discourse of masculinity not only affected religious men but also other men who participated in the war. Whilst many of those who had returned home from the war were unable to take an active part in the society they had fought to preserve, the state gave a range of distinct privileges and prestige to each combatant, based on his religiosity, and linked to this, which division he had served in, and more specifically which type of combatant he had been. Professional soldiers who participated in the war receive half the pension of those who fought in one of the religious factions, and their families receive very little restitution in comparison with the wealth of benefits and incentives that the family of a martyr from the Basij or Sepah-i Pasdaran might receive in the event of their death. Hegemonic masculinity within this regime relied on a very specific type of Islamic citizen: pious, good, loyal, brave and willing to sacrifice themselves for their religion and their country. This is not to say that all men who participated in the war necessarily bought into the Islamic rhetoric but in many respects the high proportion of young men defending their country in youthful comradeship gave a sense of purpose and unity to post-revolutionary society. The war also provided the regime with a strong base of masculine support composed of those who had performed these roles.

It could be assumed that because regressive policies towards women were adopted, the newly established gender regimes in the Islamic Republic of Iran empowered all men in every respect. The state discourse certainly attempted to narrate distinct notions of its Islamic female citizenship for its women, that is, as mobilised, educated and modest wives and mothers. However, state endeavours to produce a similarly distinctive discourse in relation to its male citizens, particularly how they related to the war, proved a more challenging task and resulted in an equivocal, incoherent narrative. Young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds were given distinct paths for

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186 Varzi, p. 160
187 Informal interview with anonymous soldier, pers, comm. to Jennifer Chandler (date purposely not identified)
advancement, through religion and military action, whereas middle- and upper-class men, as well as those from the older generations, were written out of a national narrative of masculinity altogether. Hence whilst young, religious men, like their female counterparts had gained new status and opportunities under an Islamic regime, middle class men became increasingly alienated:

These supposed men’s rights came at a high cost exacted by the state. Men bore the brunt of economic hardship and high inflation and faced the state’s heavy-handed intrusion and oppression. Being in the public [sic], they faced scrutiny in terms of adherence to the mandatory Islamic codes. From their clothes, their demeanour, their smoking, or whether they participated in the office’s noon prayer, men were scrutinised or questioned. 

Whilst increasing visibility has been given to women’s issues in this period, the assumption that the Islamic regime automatically benefitted all men should be widely disputed. As Shahin Gerami has pointed out:

This notion of pro-men advantages enrages parents of boys. They are quick to point out how hard it is to raise boys compared to girls in the Republic. Even parents dedicated to the equal education of their sons and daughters admit that if all else fails, a girl can marry and be a wife, whereas a boy cannot take being a husband for granted. To become a husband, a man needs to become an income earner. If boys survive crowded schools, the corrupting influences of drugs, and harassment at the hands of the authorities and vigilantes, they face the Herculean task of college entrance exams.

Though these social problems became more apparent after the war, as a new generation of post-revolutionary youth attempted to carve out their own social space away from Islamic narratives of citizenry, the difficulties of being young, male and middle class were already coming to the fore as soon as the regime came to power after the revolution: “Political unrest in the universities in the spring of 1980, which caused the closure of universities by the government (with Khomeini’s agreement)...ushered in the era known as the Cultural Revolution.”

The Islamisation of education, the workplace and the cultural scene was to directly affect middle-class students and men in the professions as Islamic credentials had to be demonstrated if jobs were to be kept. In addition to this, young men faced huge pressure to go to war

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188 Gerami, (2003), p. 270
189 Ibid.
and serve their country and to actively hide any ambivalence towards the regime. Just as the veil was imposed on women, so a male dress code was also enforced (at least during the war years) in order to create a strong visible image of an Islamic society—thereby writing the state onto the bodies of its citizens.\footnote{Varzi, p.113}

Just as urban middle- and upper-class men were struggling to find a place in post-revolutionary society which demanded Islamic credentials, so their female counterparts, secular middle- and upper-class women, were horrified as they were forced to don the garb of model Islamic citizens. The direct attack on progressive legislation regarding women gave a clear objective around which to rally their cause. For both the ruling clergy and the young Basiji volunteers they had nurtured, ‘the urban middle-class women embodied and symbolized the Pahlavi decadence.’\footnote{Gerami, (2003), p. 262}

Whilst women’s advancement had characteristically been a part of oppositional (mainly leftist) movements in the pre-revolutionary era, during the post-revolutionary era the woman question emerged as a separate, independent cause. It is here that it is possible to see the greatest shift in political opposition within Iranian literature, one that might even be termed the emergence of a new political opposition. The rise of post-revolutionary feminist literature is one of the greatest indicators of the general move towards feminist consciousness outside of a Marxist discourse. The gender policies of the revolution gave rise to women producing literature that focussed on individual struggles and gender issues, rather than subordinating these to more generalised class concerns. As an interview conducted by Kian Azadeh with an anonymous activist in Tehran reveals: ‘I realized that revolutionary social activity was meaningless when women were losing their rights, and started to defend women’s rights.’\footnote{Interview with an anonymous Islamist activist, Tehran, 1994 in Kian, Azadeh, ‘Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change-British,’ \textit{Journal of Middle Eastern Studies}, Vol. 24 No. 1. (May, 1997) p. 77} With the decline of the oppositional left, and a rise of female support for the Islamic regime, women’s issues were virtually abandoned by the left:
The leftist opposition, especially in larger organisations, did not officially support the women’s movement... they maintained the pre-revolutionary stance that feminism was bourgeois.  

In the wake of the revolution, women came out onto the streets to protest against legislation which enshrined them as second class citizens. This constituted a cohesive response to a specific gender issue, one that had previously been subsumed as a part of a more generalized leftist concern for social justice.

The 1978-1979 Revolution, closely followed by the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, was to bring about monumental social changes to Iranian society, empowering new groups and subordinating others. Whilst the effect of the revolution on women’s rights has been well documented by scholars of Middle Eastern feminisms, there has remained an over-riding assumption that an Islamic regime would automatically benefit all men. Whilst Iraq maintained a status-quo similar to that which prevailed before the war, the coming of a new regime to Iran created new hegemonic and subaltern groups. Iran narrated a very clear vision for its male and female citizens, a narrative which not only dominated the public space but also the cultural scene. Whilst the Ba’athist state in Iraq proposed a citizenry bound by their “Iraqiness,” the Islamic Republic narrated a vision of a state based on its citizens’ religiosity. Post-revolutionary Iranian narratives carefully linked the nation to Islam, seeming to offer a clear and distinct path for young men and women to progress in a newly reorganised society. Whilst secular middle-class women were automatically excluded from this mobilized Islamic society, they constituted and came to form their own political force and have continued to fight this exclusion and their demonization as products of westernisation. However, for subaltern groups of men, particularly those from the middle-classes, there has been a continuing silence about how they negotiate with, and within, an Islamised public arena. As the regime’s legitimacy and the defence of the nation were carried out by youth in this era, the alienation of “other” men has created its own unique crisis because privilege comes at the cost of bargaining with the state. This state of crisis may seem surprising in a state that is assumed to benefit masculinity because of the regression of the status of women and the privileging of male narratives but it is an important aspect of the novels which are analysed as part of this study.

Kamran, Talattof, ' Iranian Women’s Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism,' International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 29 (1997) 531-538

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2.5: Gender and Iran-Iraq War Fiction

The relationship between gender, literature and the state reveals an interesting and complex picture of Iran and Iraq during the 1970s and the 1980s. Both governments realised the importance of attempting to fix narratives about the state, its policies and personalities, particularly during wartime, as they sought to consolidate their respective regimes. As both Khomeini and Saddam Hussein prioritised the formation of cultural discourse, of which literature was seen to be integral part, authors had to tread a thin line as they tried to maintain their literary and political integrity whilst conforming to state censorship laws in order to be able publish their work and escape state violence. Whilst state narratives were mainly concerned with both countries’ citizenry, which was inevitably heavily gendered, literature became one of many cultural tools through which the states sought to disseminate their image of society. As Baghdad and Tehran flooded their own literary scenes with government-sponsored and government-produced literary propaganda, other literature became lost in the sea of indoctrinating voices. As such, war literature has and remains heavily stigmatized as a product of state propaganda, and dissonant voices have failed to emerge from a corpus of literature that has been so heavily invested in by each state. This is not to say that all “good” literature of this period was necessarily polemically anti-war and that this corpus of fiction can therefore be examined through a polarised lens of good anti-war and bad pro-war fiction, but rather that there is a spectrum of attitudes, which interact with hegemonic state narratives, popular culture and aesthetic literary quality.

Fiction in both countries was and remains deeply grounded in political and social issues, as fiction in the 1980s was directly affected by the political and social upheaval of both revolution and the outbreak of war. As such, Persian and Arabic literatures’ critical reception has been dominated by its political messages. Considering that a vast majority of writers from both Iran and Iraq, including those in this study, have been politically active and in some cases have been directly affected by the draconian rules of the state, perhaps this will always be the case. Even so, I have sought to refine these formulations, and demonstrate that this particular body of fiction has been side-lined because analyses have not taken into account the historical specificity, as well as the political difficulties, of its production. Though the Ba’ath and the Islamic Republic of Iran took great pains to produce particular narratives of their rule, as well as of the
state’s relationship with the nation and its citizens, this chapter has demonstrated the historical specificity of the literary imagination. Whilst state propaganda (and literature through co-option and coercion) was supposed to produce and subscribe to narratives of state hegemony which privileged and promoted certain types of citizens as the model for the nation, in truth these ideals were never truly fixed.

The concept of hegemony is more of a performative than a realizable process. Accordingly, though narratives of masculinities and femininities were strongly invested in by the state and its legislative reform seemed to support masculine power, the reality was that patterns of ethnic, religious, age and socio-economic status had an important bearing on how these processes affected the citizens, and their subsequent representation in literature, of both Iran and Iraq. Whilst legislation concerning private family law remained grounded in religious doctrine in both Iran and Iraq during the 1980s, adhering to Christine Keating’s understanding of male power bargaining in post-colonial nations, the assumption that this process would automatically benefit all men is a fallacy. The relationship between legislative policy and state narratives on gender did not homogenously shape all Iraqi and Iranian citizens into a single state legislated mould. Specific groups were either subordinated or privileged as both regimes sought to secure legitimacy for their rule, and this was not solely determined by gender, nor did it empower all men, particularly as extra-legal measures were prevalent tools of coercion in both countries. Whilst the status quo of Iraqi society was maintained throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, the revolution in Iran completely changed the social structure of society. Though new discourses on gender emerged as a result of the Islamization of society, and the rights of men were cemented within family law, the state itself privileged Islamised citizens rather than men per se. Despite this, patriarchy has become the ubiquitous framework for explaining both Iranian and Iraqi masculinities during this period, even though it does not take into account some of the most basic flaws in its explanatory power. At a time when the father-figure and the older man were eclipsed by younger, militarised men in a modern-nation state, the state privileged and empowered certain groups of men and women who would legitimise its rule. These privileges were by no means constant or stable but the relationship between men, as well as the empowerment of some women (both of whom were co-opted by state narratives) through a unified notion of nation, could be better understood through a formulation of fraternity rather than patriarchy.
The relationship between male literary representation and the act of participation in war cannot be overstated. Not only does war fiction utilise dominant narratives of masculinity to underpin the vast majority of its characterization and thematic concerns, it has also transformed gender into a quintessential social allegory to represent the state of the nation and society within this corpus of fiction.\textsuperscript{370} This does not mean that gender and, more particularly, masculinity are represented homogenously within the corpus of fiction which is being examined here, but that their representation is inextricably bound up with telos of the nation.

\textsuperscript{370} Massad, p. 270

3.1: OVERVIEW

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War was met with a dramatic literary reaction in response to the crisis. For Iraqi authors the outbreak of war created an urgency to respond to Iraq’s invasion of its Persian neighbour, but it was also marked by an increasing constraint imposed on literature by Saddam Hussein’s regime. In Iran, the war, which helped to consolidate the religious nature of the revolution, proved an inspirational theme for Islamic revolutionary writers.66 Whilst both countries witnessed the proliferation of fiction and poetry which supported both states’ agendas, there was also a strong alternative response by writers who opposed the outbreak of war.

Initially however, the response, as is depicted in the opening scenes of Ahmad Mahmud’s novel Zamin-i Sukhtah (Scorched Earth), was one of shock. His characters, like the people of Khuzestan, were caught completely off-guard by the Iraqi invasion. However, unlike the response common to both countries in which literature from state publishing houses emphasised the experience of war as a religious and national doctrine, the fiction of the Iraqi and Iranian writers being analysed in this chapter nuanced and documented the external and psychological experience of war on the quotidian. The two Persian novels examined in this chapter by Ahmad Mahmud and Esma’il Fassih, responded to the crisis with some urgency. Both authors document the crisis as a lived experience, allowing the complete panorama of war, battle, propaganda and ordinary people to come together.

Moreover, this stand-point is also adopted by Betool Khedairi, in the Iraqi novel Kam Badat Al-Sama’ Qariba!! (A Sky So Close) also analysed in this chapter. Like Fassih and Mahmud’s novels, A Sky So Close discusses a plethora of external influences shaping the lives of her narrator. Instead of ignoring the war as a powerful social force, these novels choose to critique it by interacting with government propaganda, society and the realities of war. As in other collections of novels and short stories, the war is the background for the lives and events of characters who struggle to survive the everyday, rather than those who commit acts of heroism on the frontline. This

66 Talattof, p. 112
emphasis on daily struggle, found in both Khedairi’s Iraqi novel, *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!!*, and the Iranian novels in this chapter, echoes and correlates with other fiction written outside of government purview. For example, like Duna Talib’s collection of short-stories *Harbnama* (Book of War), in which ‘the heroism of the protagonists is that of surviving against all odds rather than performing grandiose acts,’ *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!!*, Zamin-i Sukhtah and Zamastan-i ’62 favour the reality of war as both an internal and external experience. They each achieve their particular emphasis and critique by closely bordering reality and clearly portraying their characters’ socio-cultural interactions with the state and society.

However, this trend diverges radically from the collection of stories by ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser, which in contradistinction to the other texts, which depict the war as an interactive process, avoids the war and direct contact with “reality” altogether. Nasser’s collection dwells in the realm of magical realism passing critique whilst avoiding interaction with an oppressive dictator. Like the other Iran-Iraq War novels by Iraqi writers in this study, (*I’jaam* by Sinan Antoon and more obviously *al-Fatit al-Muba’thar* by Muhsin al-Ramlî), Nasser’s literary style consists of contrasting two contradictory levels of reality. In Nasser’s collection, however, it is the more fantastic of the two levels that is privileged in order to evade censorship. Whilst magical realism is a common feature of Iraqi novels, and maybe considered to be a direct response to a distinctly Iraqi style of writing, in this instance it was a choice necessitated by the fact that Nasser still lived in Iraq at the time of the collection was published. As such, it follows that this is also the text which has the most amorphous ties to the Iran-Iraq War as a theme. The war is almost never mentioned, just as Saddam and the Ba’ath regime are never directly referred to. Instead, the text relies on magical realism as a narrative mode to reflect, infer and criticise contemporary Iraqi society. Unlike the other novels which were written in diaspora and which deal with the war by representing it as a pervasive background to the actions of their characters, in this collection of short-stories, it is a spectre, haunting the text like the dictator: present but never mentioned. This theme, of a pervasive but disembodied dictator, is common to

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199 Nasrin Rahimieh, ‘Magical Realism in Moniru Ravanipur’s Ahl-e Gharq,’ *Iranian Studies*, 23:1/4, (19990), 61-75, (p. 65)
all of the Iraqi novels in this study, all of which share and promote a narrative which examines and, through its themes, privileges the nature and effects of authoritarianism and depicts war as its by-product. The presence of the dictator is far more traumatic than the war, precisely because he is able to intervene in every aspect of the characters’ lives until they are powerless to withstand his terrifying reach.

It is this impotence which forms the link between the experiences of masculinity in both the Iranian and the Iraqi novels in this chapter. The Iran-Iraq War remains a dramatic symbol of crisis in the representation of gender relations in this fiction. Most of all, in terms of its dominant representations of masculinities, the texts are characterised by patriarchal absence, played out through the absence of the father-figure. Instead of powerful male voices, the reader experiences the violent rejection of patriarchy as the war necessitates the promotion and reification of younger men. In this fiction older men are a site of contestation, impotent or are absent from the text entirely. As such, all of the texts bespeak a crisis of masculinity, a crisis which inevitably reflects how each novel or short-story collection views the state of the nation upon the outbreak of war.

This inevitably has wider implications for the masculinities represented in this fiction when they are viewed through a nationalist or political prism. Through various manifestations, male sexuality in Iran-Iraq War fiction serves a very real political purpose because of the indelible link between male sexuality and the telos of the nation. It is particularly through crisis and transition that the experience of being male is most often formulated. For the men in Zamastan-i 62 (The Winter of '83) this is particularly played out through the rejection of patriarchal roles, impotence and the inevitable failure of every typology of masculinity which attempts to exist in the no man’s land of the South-Western frontier. Unlike the later Persian novels discussed in chapter 4, which take refuge in fraternity, Fassih’s novel articulates a failed negotiation between male identity and a state which promotes youth and martyrdom as the epitome of masculinity. Just as Saddam Hussein isolated ordinary men from public discourse, and by saturating public space with honed militarised masculinity in his own image, rendered them unable to meet masculine demands on a national level, so too

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the Islamic Republic engaged in a parallel cultivation of discourse. The Islamic Republic permeated public space with two typologies of the masculine ideal: the older man as wise mullah and the younger man as a religious martyr, and as a result space for other men was written out of public discourse. It is this space, this silence in the public discourse surrounding the war, which lies at the centre of masculine crisis in both *Zamastan-i '62* (The Winter of '83) and in *Zamin-i Sukhtah* (Scorched Earth). Here both narrators offer first-hand accounts of the war, but as non-combatants they are offered no part in its narratives.


If, as Shahin Gerami has asserted, the Islamic revolutionary government discredited major pre-revolutionary masculine typologies and instead promoted new masculine types in which: ‘the mullahs became the leaders of revolution, martyrs its soul, and men its beneficiaries,’ then Esma’il Fassih’s war novel carefully deconstructs and strips away these state narratives of masculinities. Fassih’s three main male characters can be seen as distorted manifestations of male prototypes promoted by the Islamic Republic: the first is a maimed and disabled Basiji; the second an impotent patriarch; and the third, a martyr who can only achieve the epitome of idealised maleness through physical absence brought about through death. As such, the novel uncovers the mendacity of state claims to masculinity, and instead reveals men forced into crisis and decline by a society consumed by war.

Published in 1987, Esma’il Fassih’s critically acclaimed novel *Zamastan-i '62*, (Winter of ‘83), was one of the first novels about the war which transcended the political and ideological boundaries which divided post-revolutionary Iranian society. At the heart of the novel is a desire to show the effects of war on everyone, rather than privileging one class or faction over another. The novel presents, ‘a panoply of displaced characters of different classes and political convictions, all grappling with the death of loved ones or contemplating the possibility of their own deaths.’ It is the suffering experienced by civilians, particularly those in the South-Western frontiers cities, which inform the novel’s thematic concerns. *Zamastan-i '62* like Ahmad Mahmud’s *Zamin-i

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Sukhtah (Scorched Earth), emphasises the destruction of cityscapes and families outside of an ideological rhetoric. However, the novel never ignores this rhetoric and constantly engages with a sliding scale of beliefs and convictions from a variety of characters from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

Set in the third year of the Iran-Iraq War, Zamastan-i ’62 is told through the voice of Jalal Aryan, a recurring protagonist in Fassih’s oeuvre. The main narrative focus of the novel, however, is Jalal Aryan’s companion, the ill-fated computer engineer, Dr. Mansur Farjam. Recently returned from America to escape the grief of the untimely death of his American fiancée, Mansur Farjam joins Jalal Aryan on his first journey from Tehran to Ahvaz. The aim of his journey is to set up a computer and English language training centre in Ahvaz, an ambition which is soon hindered and obstructed by the bureaucracy, internal politics and confusion of a newly formed revolutionary government. Upon their arrival in Ahvaz, Jalal Aryan and Mansur Farjam quickly fall in with a group of middle-class Iranian characters who have all been affected by the war. Among them is Laleh Jahanshahi, who very soon becomes the Iranian manifestation of Mansur Farjam’s American lover. However, Laleh is in love with Farshad Kianzad, who has been drafted into the military as a conscript and who, like all males over the age of fourteen, is refused an exit visa until he has completed his draft. When Farshad is about to be sent to the killing fields of Majnun Island, and following the death of her mother, Laleh attempts suicide. This prompts Mansur Farjam to swap his passport and residency visa with Farshad, and take his place on the battlefield. The identity swap is not discovered by Jalal Aryan until a few days later when he finds Mansur Farjam’s body in a military morgue wearing Farshad’s dog tags.

As Jalal Aryan oversees Mansur’s burial a few days later, Laleh and Farshad’s plane departs for Europe.

Often viewed as an extension of the author himself, Jalal Aryan, the novel’s narrator, is a well-educated, erudite and cynical character whose world views are an essential framework for Fassih’s fiction. As Ali Ferdowsi claims, whilst Jalal Aryan

ages in the fictional world of Fasih [sic]... the fundamentals of his character, and the script of his actions, remain the same. He remains the same tall, bony man, loved by women, who is naturally drawn to helping those in need of help, those who are wronged by the evil that dwells in the world, prototypically a damsel in distress, which in turn, more often than not, drives the
plot forward. Even when Jalal is not the narrator or the protagonist, his story provides context for Fassih’s fiction.

This formula is adhered to fastidiously in *Zamastan-i ’62*, as Jalal Aryan sets out to find a missing war veteran and ends up marrying a widow of an executed opposition party member to help her obtain an exit visa. These scripted actions which compel Jalal Aryan to rescue other characters in Fassih’s novels, form the apex of the narrative arc of *Zamastan-i ’62*. Fassih’s deployment of this search and rescue formula allows his narrator to explore his surroundings and display compassion for other characters’ predicaments despite his outward cynicism. The novel is testament to the depth of feeling that the author had for the region, and it is an elegy for his life in Abadan, which was brought to an abrupt end by war and revolution.

The novel is divided into three constituent parts: these respectively depict Jalal Aryan’s time in Ahvaz; his friendship with the ill-fated Mansur Farjam; and his search for Idris Al-i Matrud the missing Basiji and son of an ex-employee he knows from his time in Abadan. Suspecting that Idris has been disabled after joining the Basij, Aryan promises Idris’s father that he will go and search for him. Much like Fassih’s previous novel *Suraya dar Egma* (Sorraya in a Coma), which sees Aryan at the hospital bedside of his comatose niece in Paris, the search for Idris Al-i Matrud also serves as a pretext for Jalal Aryan’s journeys and encounters with the displaced, dysfunctional and isolated characters in *Zamastan-i ’62*. Similarly, like the comatose Suraya, who symbolises the passivity and alienation of Iranian expatriates from their homeland, Idris is lost and maimed just like the cities of the South Western frontier region. As such, Idris’s physical being is directly linked to the state of the nation, and therefore national teleology. His connection to the land is furthered enhanced and reinforced by his name which comes to serve as an important literary trope in the novel: Al-i Matrud, meaning dynasty (al) of the outcasts (matrud), comes to reflect both the region of Iran to which Idris has become devoted, and the displaced characters encountered by Jalal Aryan on his search.

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*Ferdowsi, Encyclopaedia Iranica,*


*Fassih, p. 9*
Jalal Aryan, whose name alludes to the glorious culture of ancient Iranian civilization, is so named because of his own enduring and unshakeable link to the pre-Islamic notion of Iran. By linking a protagonist’s name to larger classical narratives specific to Iranian history and literature, Fassih demonstrates the terrible consequences of the declining patriarchal figure. His detachment from political philosophy, his admiration for those who serve Iran, his radical agnosticism and religious cynicism establish Jalal Aryan as an enduring figure aligned with an eternal Iranian nation, permanent and steadfast, thereby dissociating him from the ever mutable and shifting loyalties of political and religious philosophies. However, his declining status is also indicative of a nation forced into a reactive reflexivity. Jalal Aryan is old enough to be considered of the pre-revolutionary generation, and is the only older male protagonist in the Iranian novels analysed as part of this study. However, his ability to be present and retain his narrative authority is derived from his refusal either to adhere to traditional standards of patriarchy or to engage in its practices. Aryan’s power is in decline, but unlike Idris Al-i Matrud whose state of crisis is written upon his physicality, Jalal Aryan’s decline is embodied through a psycho-sexual crisis. As Azar Naficy has argued of the 1980s war novel, there is a ‘lack of active interaction between male and female characters... dialogue between men and women is avoided through the absence of men or their psychological or physical impotence.’ Naficy makes specific reference to Jalal Aryan’s previous appearance as the narrator in *Suraya dar Aghma* to demonstrate this point. She states that in *Suraya dar Egma* ‘the romantically cynical hero leaves Iran for Paris where he...finds a very attractive and equally cynical lady. She is so overpowering that the man becomes metaphorically impotent.’ This then becomes a repetitious motif in Fassih’s fiction. In *Zamastan-i ’62*, when Jalal Aryan marries Maryam Jazayari she comes to his hotel room to seduce him, but Jalal Aryan ultimately rejects her sexual advances. Jalal Aryan’s refusal to take advantage of his patriarchal marital “rights” mirrors the decline of older male power outside of the hotel bedroom. This episode rewrites traditional formulations of patriarchy, in which women are vessels of male honour and men are virile subjects, and instead shows a man rejecting a woman’s sexual advances, thereby maintaining a state of masculinity which is written out of male virility. Jalal Aryan’s lack of virility comes, therefore, to reflect not only his own state of

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208 Ibid.
crisis, but also the changing power relations found in wider society depicted by the novel.

When Maryam initially arrives in the hotel room Jalal is aroused by the seduction she plans. However it soon becomes clear that he is unable to maintain his arousal within a framework of normative codes of patriarchal masculinity. The initial arousal dissipates as soon as Maryam is placed with a marital context, and she refers to herself as his wife.

“You don’t want your wife to come to your side...” “Are you sure you know what you’re doing,” I said this in English so that she could collect her wits. She took off her Islamic overcoat. “I wore my wedding night clothes for you.”[…].“Not tonight.” “Why?” “Not here.” “She sighed, “OK.”

In these novels about the Iran-Iraq War, it is the decision to reject traditional formulations of patriarchy and male sexuality which alert the reader to changing notions of male power. When it is suggested that Jalal can assume the paternal role of husband and father, and take advantage of his sexual “right” to the female body, the eroticism of the encounter quickly dissolves. When Maryam insists that he is her rightful and legal husband he declares that he is not ‘anyone’s husband.”  

He is the perpetual bachelor, a lone and unusual figure in a culture which is perceived as investing heavily in a paternal family unit. It is not simply that Jalal Aryan is impotent, but that his conscious and deliberate rejection of patriarchal purpose indicates collusion with the rearrangement of power relations. As at the ending of Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s novel, Bagh-e Bolur” (The Crystal Garden) in which men are either absented through death, or are physically or psychologically maimed and therefore impotent,”  Fassih’s novel documents the impotence, disability and absence of men as they attempt to renegotiate modern notions of being a man in post-revolutionary Iran.

The post-revolutionary world, with its changing attitudes and new complexities, force all the characters to reassess how to relate to the society in which they live. Whilst the curtailment of women’s rights by the Islamic state are presented as a straightforward

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“Fassih, p. 313
"Fassih, p. 312
"Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Bagh-e Bolur (Tehran: Barg, 1986)
"Naficy, p. 127
political assault on an externalised position of women, for men changing notions of masculinity are more deeply internalised. By uncoupling fundamental notions of identity and power, and representing changing and failing male privilege, the novel forces masculinity into a state of crisis. For example, though Maryam Jazayari, the widow whom Jalal Aryan marries, has been unjustly forced out of her job by the regime, the event does not cause her to fundamentally reassess the nature of her gender. By contrast, Jalal Aryan is forced into a state of existential crisis as he attempts to determine new codes of masculine practice. These new codes of practice become inextricably linked with a state of crisis, as the decision to reject traditional formulations of patriarchy and male sexuality alert the reader to changing notions of male power. Jalal Aryan functions as the litmus paper for the decline of patriarchal masculinity. It is not simply that he lacks virility but that his deliberate rejection of patriarchal purpose indicates his own collusion in the rearrangement of power relations. Whilst Idris Al-i Matrud is physically wounded thus reflecting the war-stricken lands to which he is connected, Jalal Aryan represents the embattled and declining patriarchal figure forced to carve out a new position in a world which privileges youth and fraternity. The novel describes a physical world in which public space is wholly dictated to by the ideology of the new government and its vision of youth and martyrdom:

At the end of the alley between the end of Melli Garden and Karoun cinema parts of the fake wall were painted with murals. Simple, crude drawings depicting several teenage combatants all holding ZH3s in their hands; one of them is crawling in military fashion at the bottom of an embankment, another wades through the river and another had which been martyred amongst the date palms. The philosophy and the ideology of the city, a place with a miniature version of the Al-Aqsa Mosque dome. There are also several drawings of famous spiritual images and several slogans, which read: “We will defy America,” or “Islam is watered with the blood of martyrs”...Another large billboard shows a group of Basiji boys going in the direction of the frontline without armaments and with bare heads except for red bandannas tied around their foreheads which read the words, “Karbala, we are coming.”

The novel shows Jalal Aryan, and by extension, Fassih himself, vigorously contesting the cultivation of youth and martyrdom that is inscribed into public space. Whilst Idris Al-i Matrud becomes a physical manifestation of a maimed land, and Jalal Aryan an...
impotent patriarch, the major focus of this novel is its discussion of youth and martyrdom as a tragic fallacy concocted by the state.

The appropriation of martyrdom as a contemporary religious phenomenon is strongly rejected by the novel. Instead Fassih’s novel recognises the phenomenon of martyrdom within a litany of manifestations, and most prominently of all, within a spiritual pre-modern framework as opposed to the dogma proliferated by a modern politically religious narrative. The transformation of Mansur Farjam, the third and final major male character, is the novel’s attempt to reappropriate martyrdom as an Iranian, rather than a politically Islamic phenomenon. The result of such reappropriation, however, is the bizarre paradox that in order to achieve the quintessence of Iranian masculinity within a war time context, its male subjects have to be dead and thus absent from the narrative which drives the plot of each story. The path to self-annihilation which Mansur Farjam experiences is not one that can merely be explained using the Karbala paradigm but one that is indelibly linked to Iran and its history of self-sacrifice.

Indeed, whilst medieval Persian poetry informs much of Mansur Farjam’s spiritual enlightenment, it needs to be shown as gathering its explanation and philosophies from other religions and doctrines in order to divest it of its dependence on the Islamic Republic’s vision of martyrdom. There exists within Persian literature a long history of martyrdom, and despite popular notions, particularly in the West, it is not one derived exclusively from an Islamic model. The crude appropriation of public space with an Islamicised derivation of the concept of martyrdom, and therefore a typology of masculine hegemony, is heavily criticised by the novel. The novel carefully emphasises that martyrdom cannot be attributed to one source, but is heavily grounded in a number of stories, myths and legend throughout different periods of Persian literary history. It is telling that Christian symbols and mythology become intertwined with the concept of martyrdom, as the Iranian children killed in the bombing raids on the cities are equated with the male children ‘killed indiscriminately by the order of King Herod because he had heard that Jesus would wrest his power

Alireza Korangy, ‘A Literary and Historical Background of Martyrdom in Iran,’ Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 29:3, (2009) 528-543
from him.” This pick and mix of philosophies is in direct contravention to the strict dictates of the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the construction of martyrdom was overseen by the state which, through the stories of individual martyrs, attempted to capture the imagination of other men who composed the majority of its supporters. This official vision of the relationship between masculinity, the state, and narratives of martyrdom are closely monitored in the novel. The characters read “real-life” testimonials of state martyrs and these are used to juxtapose Mansur Farjam’s account of his own martyrdom. The testimonials that Fassih uses are indistinguishable from actual material published by Huzah Hunari, and demonstrate the duplicitous strength of the Karbala paradigm as a mobilising force.

In the name of God, the lovers and the martyrs: this is for you Mother-and is accompanied with my warm regards. Regards which have been warmed by a fire of bullets, mortar shells and the muggy air of a blood-stained city, this is for you...Years ago when I was released from your warm breast, I wished every day that I would soon be martyred on the frontline so that I could arrive in your embrace in paradise. My dear mother-You and I are two wild gazelles and alone in a valley of love, which the black lues of separation we have familiar lights. If we two lonely people, two wanderers thirsty for love and sorrows and pain of separation because of death by the fire and the explosion of bullets and katyusha our lives before and after but we know another language and I hope that I know that by the right of Aqa-ye Imam the time of Mehdi (‘Aj) will bring my wait to an end and I will arrive at his desideratum. Mother-You have never been at the front and do not know how pleasant the air is...The foxhole is the same as the Mihrab (Altar) of worship, the same ecstasy of the Ziyarat, the same bed of love for the martyrs.

Fassih’s characters read these testimonies as they transport the corpses of soldiers, both admiring their national valour and critiquing the way in which these men’s lives have been warped by state dogma. The theme of religiosity which runs throughout the martyr’s testimonial, greatly contrasts with Mansur Farjam’s attitude towards the state. Mansur Farjam recognises that the government is reliant on the war to consolidate its own powerbase. He notes this in his diary, which Jalal Aryan reads:

The country is in the grip of war and is bedevilled by problems after the revolution. The government of the Islamic Republic need the war; So much so that the two have been

Fassih, p. 245
Pedram Partovi, ‘Martyrdom and the “Good Life” in the Iranian Cinema of the Sacred Defense,’ Comparative Studies of South Asia and the Middle East, 29:3 (2008) 513-532 (p. 516)
Fassih, p. 207
incorporated into one another in such a manner that one is inseparable from the other, and has united their enemies. The defeat of Iran in the war is the defeat of the Islamic Republic. Therefore Iran dies and we must be in agony. Iran’s victory in the war is going to create problems for the world, because all of the regions will be settled under the banner Islamic Republic. The nation will bleed. Iran is a great country and an immortal nation and Iran’s undertakings must not be underestimated.

In contrast with the soldiers who regularly wrote frontline testimonies of their motivations and experiences which were published after their deaths, Mansur Farjam maintains a sense that he is fighting for Iran and for the soldiers that he admires rather than for orthodoxy. Mansur Farjam does not swap I.D cards with Farshad Kianzad to defend an Islamic ideology, but to succumb to his own ancient Iranian spirituality which, in the context of this novel, links ideal masculinity to death and male absence. It has however been contended by Isabel Stumpel that ‘the death of the young engineer in Fassih’s Zemestan 62 [sic] is shown as a consequence of his personal depressive disposition, rather than as a parallel to the Kerbela paradigm.’ This is true to some extent, but his reasons for fighting and dying are much more complex than can simply be explained by depression. Mansur Farjam’s commitment to and interest in martyrdom is derived from the self-sacrificing acts of individuals, rather than the all-encompassing views of the state. It is for the individual soldier that Mansur Farjam places a tulip on top of his television. Whilst Stumpel claims that Mansur Farjam develops a growing interest in the state-fuelled expression of martyrdom, his own path to paradise through self-annihilation is at odds with the state prescribed phenomenon. Just as Mansur Farjam turns from the path of martyrdom offered him by an orthodox modern Islamic framework, so too does he choose an alternative commitment to his nation shaped by older ascetic aspirations found within a Sufi narrative of Islam. Mansur Farjam’s transition from American intellectual to Iranian martyr does not conform to the grand narratives of martyrdom explicated by the post-revolutionary Islamic government: it follows the medieval equivalent, which was predicated on ‘celibacy, mortification, silence, seclusion, sleep deprivation and

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"Fassih, p. 214
"Fassih, p. 178
"Stumpel, p. 166
abstinence from food. Ultimately Mansur Farjam’s path to martyrdom differs from a standard political narrative, and is ultimately responsible for his own crisis of masculinity, which leads him away from an ideologically religious present to an epic literary past. It is thus that Mansur Farjam reclaims martyrdom as an Iranian phenomenon, thereby separating it from a modern Islamic ideology. Here self-sacrifice occurs on a number of different levels, including self-sacrifice for the motherland and the enlightenment obtained from the image of the beloved, congruent with a twelfth century framework.

Just as the regime promoted the notion that ‘the ideal for an Islamic Basiji was to die for the nation, which took on the role of an object of love and was replicated discursively in chants and war songs and ultimately inscribed in the names of the dead-young virgin martyrs,’ so a physical union with the land is privileged over any relationship with a “real” woman. Virginity or refraining from sexual activity plays a key role in the male combatants’ ability to achieve mystical transcendence. The rejection of the father, marriage and the nuclear family, allows male characters like Mansur Farjam to reject oppressive patriarchal structures. However the inevitable consequence of this is that death morphs into the epicentre of youth-orientated hegemonic masculinity and culminates in the physical absence of young men as they die.

Hence, male success within a national context is predicated upon the father-patriarch as site of contestation, though the fraternal alternative is forced to thrive upon absence and death. Just as it is vital for Jalal to reject a patriarchal role if he is to retain agency within the story, the masculine success of younger men is determined by their unmarried, virginal status for it is this which enables them to maintain independence from the family structure which would oppress them. Echoing the play, *Waiting for Godot* which Fassih uses to extrapolate the more complex philosophical principles of the novel by having Jalal Aryan read pertinent passages at key narratological

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223 Varzi, p.47
224 The pervading themes and ideas which form the basis of the novel are heavily indebted to two seminal texts. The first, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, (1953) and secondly Nizami Ganjavi’s epic romance *Layli and Majnun* commissioned by Abu’l Muzaffar Shirwanshah in 1188 A.D.
moments, *Zamastan-i ’62* articulates ‘the trauma of displaced masculinity, the loss of the father, and place in the nation state.’\(^{225}\) And just as *Waiting for Godot* has been read as an exegesis on the failures of modern patriarchy,\(^{226}\) *Zamastan-i ’62* denies the power of the father in favour of both the younger, fraternal men. The fate of Mansur Farjam is closely linked to his association with the second text, Nizami’s epic *Layli and Majnun* which influences the direction of Fassih’s novel. Mansur, a pun on majnun (literally madman or lunatic) links the fate of the unfortunate engineer to the famous and enduring character in Nizami’s epic romance *Layli and Majnun*. Moreover the object of his affection, Laleh, which translates into English as tulip, an Iranian symbol of martyrdom, is also a pun on Layli. She is a powerful symbol of Mansur’s impending demise as her devotion to another warps the traditional Persian tale. Through Mansur Farjam, Fassih emphasises a spirituality that is available to Iranians outside of the rhetoric of dogmatic ideology announced through posters and in monuments in public spaces of *Zamastan-i ’62*.

Ultimately however, the fates of the characters in this text are a warped reflection of the external texts which influence *Zamastan-i ’62* because masculinity is associated so closely with the disintegration of society. Thus the popularised notions of masculine typologies, expounded by the Islamic theocracy in their public rhetoric, are rerouted through failed frameworks of masculinities. The wise mullah is transformed into a patriarchal figure in decline, embodied by Jalal Aryan; the brave Basiji depicted through Idris Al-i Matrud is disabled and lost, and the honoured martyr, Mansur Farjam, emancipates himself from the rigid doctrines of contemporary political Islam by rejecting its narratives of self-annihilation. Accordingly, to be an Iranian man in this novel is to be integrated into a state of crisis, a state crystallised in Mansur Farjam. At the beginning of the story Mansur Farjam is a stranger in his homeland following an extended period of living in America.

This was Dr. Mansur Farjam’s first journey to Ahvaz in over twelve years. I was thinking that after seeing the abandoned city without electricity and the deserted streets, that he would have gotten over his admiration for Tehran but he was studying two maps of Ahvaz under the beam of light inside the car like a foreign scholarly tourist, pipe in hand.\(^{227}\)

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\(^{226}\) Ibid.

\(^{227}\) Fassih, p. 4
Rather than using the war as a reason to stay away, Mansur travels in the opposite direction both physically and metaphysically: he becomes increasingly more committed to Iran and his own self-annihilation. Mansur Farjam’s knowledge of Iran upon his arrival is derived from books and maps, rendering him little more than a tourist in his own country. Relying on texts and Western middle-class ideals of education and progress to aid his return to Iran, he is initially referred to as an American. When he first arrives in Iran he is like a stranger. He observes in his diary that:

In a new land...you feel like an empty and lost child—one whose centre of existence has been planned out at light speed, after you have been toyed with on the galactic merry-go-round. New plans have both overlaps and contradictions, which connect and decay. You become a part of your new world by way of consuming the old world piece by piece. Or the other way round.\(^{228}\)

His lack of familiarity with his surroundings and his determination to both admire his ancestral home and save it from its backwardness, while misinformed, is well-intentioned. Soon, however, Mansur’s dedication to the broken cities of the South-Western frontier overcome even the cynicism of Jalal Aryan (who though little enamoured with the current regime is firmly attached to Iran’s destiny as a nation).

Whilst the narrative arc of most of the major characters in the novel is dominated by a search for a way to leave Iran, Mansur Farjam has come to Ahvaz in search of himself and to escape the ‘West’ to which others are so desperate to flee. Once Jalal Aryan’s friend, Dr. Yar-Naser is acquainted with the peculiarities of Mansur Farjam’s situation he comments that,

Something must have made him take leave of his senses to bring him here...Ay Baba! He has a PhD in computer science, and in America has lots of money and opportunities for employment. He must be out of his mind to come here in the middle of a war. No one normal is going to do that.\(^{229}\)

Mansur Farjam’s motivations to come to Ahvaz are initially clear: to improve the region and serve Iran. As he notes in an early entry in his diary:

The technology teaching centre is gotten off the ground...A building which will one day house a museum dedicated to the magnificent ancient Iranian culture...a centre for practical

\(^{228}\) Fassih, p. 242
\(^{229}\) Fassih, p. 28
education in computer technology and foreign languages is for Iran, today under these conditions, is beneficial. A computer teaching centre which will establish the tools and disseminate the uses of the computer is vital for Iran.  

In this respect Mansur Farjam is reminiscent of other Fassihian characters, for example the exiled translator in *Suraya dar Aghma* who believes, that, despite the growing intensity of the war in Iran, it is important to translate an American book on jogging into Persian. Likewise, Mansur Farjam comes with misplaced intentions as the chaotic world of Ahvaz is immersed in war. His nostalgia for the great ancient Iranian civilizations coupled with the modernising tendencies brought with him from the West, causes him to link modernisation with westernisation. At first he does not understand the naivety of the Basijis, as he writes in his diary:  

We see them sometimes during the day and every night on the streets and on the television; wearing their camouflaged patterned combat clothes with blood red or Islam green headbands tied around their foreheads. With bunched fists in the air they shout slogans about the road to Karbala, death to America and that their acceptance of Imam Khomeini’s call of duty. Alternatively they sit with a leader chanting dirges in loud voices thumping their chests. They volunteer to serve in the war and be martyrs. They range from thirteen or fourteen year old children to eighty year old men with white beards. The children will never become prisoners of war and the old men will never come back...They are the contradictory phenomenon of Iran in these days...His life is saved up in the martyr’s bank and it gives him hope...But what hope? I don’t understand.  

Mansur Farjam does not understand why these men, both young and old, would lay down their lives for the simplistic ideal of heavenly reward, particularly when the lack of equipment makes their deaths all but inevitable. These men are cannon fodder. They lack training and arms to fight their Iraqi aggressor. However, as Mansur Farjam becomes more acquainted with his homeland, Jalal Aryan registers his growing admiration for the men and boys who sacrifice their lives for Iran, particularly through the symbolic action of placing a tulip on top of the television set, on which he constantly watches reports from the frontline. However, the hypocrisy of the government is acknowledged in the quote above. The Basij that Mansur Farjam observes are barely trained and lack equipment, but this is glorified in the rhetoric of the regime. This recognition, that the fate of the Islamic government is bound up with

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230 Fassih, p. 243  
232 Fassih, p.244-245
the outcome of the war, is an important revelation in the novel; Mansur Farjam’s own journey toward martyrdom is carefully redrawn and aligned with Sufi modes of sacrifice and martyrdom in order to differentiate his death from government narratives. This journey begins when Mansur Farjam is taken to hospital with a serious heart condition. Not only does he nearly die, but on his release from hospital he returns to his small, sparse rented room to find that it has been cleared out by thieves. The loss of most of his worldly goods together with this brush with mortality acts as a catalyst to the dramatic change in his philosophical outlooks. His reunification with an Iranian identity comes about through the rejection of the physical world and the lost material things, which belong to his Western past. He becomes less talkative, less naïve and more aware of the suffering of those around him.

Mansur Farjam connects his masculinity to spirituality, philosophy and nationalism whilst simultaneously rejecting sexuality in favour of asceticism. This severance of male sexuality from male power serves to highlight the shifting definitions of hegemonic masculinity with the Iranian context. It is also indicative of a sense of crisis which confusingly identifies the rejection of female sexuality as the cause of crisis, a symptom of that crisis and the solution to that crisis. Sexual abstinence thus becomes more than simply impotence; it is a political act. Just as the novel shows Jalal Aryan rejecting of the role of husband and thus sexually dominant male, so too it introduces the rejection of female sexuality and embracing of a restrained male virility as a central component to the concept of Iranian masculinity. The role that love, and particularly love for the homeland, plays in spiritual fulfilment leads to its divorce from sexuality. This has been observed in other contexts, in which a hyper-sexualised enemy is pitted against a self-controlled ascetic defender. For example, Dibyesh Anand has observed that male Hindu nationalists idealize a controlled ascetic heterosexuality, while vilifying Muslim men and women for their impetuous hyper-sexualised behaviour. Like Munn, he argues that this complicates Raewyn Connell’s too-easy equation of hegemonic masculinity with heterosexuality, and highlights the importance of paying attention to context and self-understandings. The principles of a shifting male hegemony and its separation from sexuality has also been observed in other contexts, particularly those whose “enemy” is subjected to the process of othering through frameworks of

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sexuality. Though Fassih never directly engages with Iraqi masculinity, the general literary trend, which also appears in Ahmad Mahmud’s *Zamin-i Sukhtah*, is that Iraqi masculinity is inherently corrupt, westernised and hyper-sexualised. As such, though Fassih avoids stereotyping the Iraqi enemy, the rejection of sexuality and patriarchal determinism by Jalal and Mansur as an ideal of masculinity plays into dominant representations.

The physical, spiritual and political rejection of patriarchal masculinity in favour of successful homosocial, fraternal masculinity enacts a different type of narrative with regards to female characters. Whilst Idris Al-i Matrud, the disabled Basiji, is unable to fulfil masculine values codified by national actions because of his physical impairments, the two other male characters that form the primary focus of the novel are depicted in a state of deep crisis through the uncertainty of their transition and decline. However, whilst for the younger character this marks his transition to becoming an ideal Iranian man and martyr, whilst rejecting state narratives of sacrifice, for Jalal Aryan, the older male protagonist, his rejection of femininity signifies the critical decline of the patriarch. Even though fraternity is a divergence from the well-worn narrative of men as the heroic, paternal protectors of female bystanders, it appears that women remain imbued with a powerful sexuality which must be rejected for male success to be achieved within a national context. The rejection of femininity in these novels’ homosocially-constructed worlds leads to a phenomenon in which reflections on masculine transition can only take place where women conform to well-worn female typologies. Accordingly, these typologies subscribe to the thesis female experience is marginalised at the expense of discussing the renegotiation of masculinity in a war-dominated Iran. Azar Naficy’s contention that Fassih’s work, and the 1980s Iranian novel in general, ‘vacillates between the ideological commitment and the obsessional male projections, leaving women characters shallow and intangible,’ leaves the reader with few alternatives but to agree. The absence of women in the novel, and in other novels that will be discussed as part of this study, demonstrates an

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236 Naficy, p. 128
unwillingness to draw women into a male occupied space no matter how much time and textual effort is expended complicating this space.

However, just as the society which the novel depicts began to empower different and often surprising groups of citizens, *Zamastan-i ’62* and the next novel under discussion *Zamin-i Sukhtah* number among the few novels which endow women with power and presence through the status of widowhood. Just as patriarchy does not uniformly oppress all women, fraternity does not empower all men; fraternity redistributes power rather than fundamentally equalising it thus creating its own dissonant patterns in its representation of women and its oppression of older men. Female characters, particularly unmarried female characters largely remain confined to typical female roles, whilst other women are able to explore and transgress their worlds with greater ease and freedom than the declining older man. It is the widow-figure in particular these novels who reveals the incongruity of assumptions founded upon all-encompassing male dominion.

Whilst archetypal female characters such as Laleh, Mansur Farjam’s two-dimensional love interest, are largely stripped of any meaning beyond the role of the beloved, it soon becomes clear that a nexus emerges between the complexity of female characters and their virginal status. Sexually experienced women, particularly widows, have an important part to play in representations of female characters, not only in *Zamastan-i ’62*, but in a large number of Iranian novels about the Iran-Iraq War.

The role of the widow in Iran-Iraq War literature has a multitude of manifestations, and is an important figure to juxtapose against the declining patriarchal figure because it elucidates on the theoretical incongruities of determining male power over women through patriarchal patterns. Widowhood is a role which eludes discussions of female sexuality within the dokhtar (unmarried girl) zan (woman/wife) dichotomy. Like the nanny in pre-modern fiction, who was ‘less constrained by laws of segregation that the heroine,’ the widow is able to traverse the boundaries of sexual segregation and test the boundaries of sexual propriety. Her independence, both economic and social, is almost entirely derived from her worthlessness as a sexual commodity or as a vessel of

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237 Farzaneh Milani, ‘The Mediatory Guile of the Nanny,’ *Iranian Studies*, 32:2 (Spring, 1999), 181-202 (p. 186)
male honour. Although the role of the widow empowers women to attain sexual, social and economic independence and power, the forays of female characters into the realm of masculinity is met with deep unease and often violence. Whilst the widow straddles a strictly sex segregated world her socio-economic empowerment is often accompanied by the ‘reinforcement of traditional gender relations.’ The empowerment of widowhood in this literature reflects a wider socio-political trend encouraged by government intent upon consolidating its own support base.

The role of the widow in wartime Iran was an important one; one for which the newly formed Islamic government specifically legislated, and whom they discursively modelled on Zaynab, the granddaughter of the prophet Mohammed. This discursive and legislative investment in this unique group, known as hamsaran-e shohada, had two-fold consequences. The first of these was that these women were empowered to economic and social independence via the various legislation passed to support them. Widows were allowed access to education, housing and income independent of either their own or their husbands’ families; and secondly, social prestige was accorded to them through their husbands’ martyrdom. However, ‘by investing in them, the regime had been turning human capital into political capital,’ as it relied on these women to support and propagate its vision for a Shi’ite Islamic state. The nexus between politics and widowhood was therefore inextricably linked to the political and religious status of the deceased husband. Though the widow is a commonly recurring character in Iranian fiction, her political manifestations vary as dramatically as her representations.

More than the thwarted father figure dogged by his declining status, the figure of the widow is allowed more freedom to explore new opportunities for power and independence. The two widows which feature in Zamastan-i ‘62 and Ahmad Mahmud’s novel Zamin-i Sukhtah occupy polarised positions on the political spectrum; their political differences also guide their search for social empowerment. Unlike Laleh who is imbued with symbolism but divested of character because of her role as beloved, Maryam Jazayari, the widow of an executed political dissident, is a far

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238 Zahedi, p. 270
239 Zahedi, p. 272
240 Zahedi, p. 283
more complex and less easily-defined character because there is less at stake for male honour. Maryam Jazayari is both deeply intelligent, wily and deeply sexual, she is a complex character who has been subject to grave injustices. Unlike the colourless Laleh, Maryam transgresses prescribed social boundaries to get what she wants. Though her right to move freely has been taken away from her by the men who executed her husband, because she is unhampered by virginity she is able to utilise any means at her disposal, including her own sexuality, to regain her freedoms.

It is significant, however, that Maryam Jazayari’s social class immediately separates her from wider social expectations and government rhetoric connected with widowhood. Her education and upper-class social status in the novel are immediate indicators of a person who is in some way alienated from her religious heritage and as such represents the political opposite to the state war widow. Her education and westernisation are therefore indicators of a sophistication associated with intellectualism and atheism. When Dr Yar-Naser jokes with Maryam Jazayari, that he will find her a young Hezbollahi to marry, she exclaims that they ‘are all country bumpkins.’ As such the interdependence between class and religiosity immediately segregates the paths which Iranian widows can take to access power. This inevitably has a large impact on the types of experiences that are represented. Whilst Maryam Jazayari aims to gain freedom of movement and in so doing transgresses sexual boundaries and cultural proprieties, the actions of Naneh Baran in *Zamin-i Sukhtah* test social boundaries to far greater extents as she seeks authority within her own community.

*Zamastan-i ‘62* spells out for the reader a state of crisis in society brought about through war. The author depicts crisis via the emasculation of his male characters through psychological impotence, physical disability and physical corporeal absence. This constitutes the experience of the three male characters at the heart of the story; this focus speaks to a number of key themes addressed by this study. Firstly, the novel acknowledges the gap between the state’s idealisation of death and combat, and instead focuses on the reality of missing and broken men. Secondly, the novel reveals a world governed by war in which “normal” men are unable to succeed or achieve
masculine goals, revealing that when it comes to male subjects, the typologies of ideal masculinity in post-revolutionary Iran are fallacies. Thirdly and most importantly the novel represents these moments of male crisis as being indicative of the declining state of the nation, a decline which is juxtaposed against the nebulus force of femininity, a femininity which is able to thrive and mutate its power even in the most dire of circumstances. More so than the thwarted father figure who is beleaguered by his declining status, the figure of the widow is allowed more freedom to explore new opportunities for power and independence. Unlike Maryam Jazayari who explores her ability to transgress social boundaries through her sexuality, Naneh Baran remains more deeply connected with her martyred husband to maintain her prestige and fuel her social empowerment. The perceived social problems brought about by the regime invested in the wives and mothers of martyrs are then gruesomely illustrated in Ahmad Mahmud’s acclaimed war novel \textit{Zamin-i Sukhtah} (Scorched Earth).

\textbf{3.2: Ahmad Mahmud: \textit{Zamin-i Sukhtah} (Scorched Earth)}

The unique space that both Naneh Baran and Marjam Jazayari are able to carve out in wartime society correlates directly with the lack of male patronage these women receive. Whilst female characters in the Iranian war novel have typically been devoid of subjectivity, their removal from the control of father, husband or brother enables them to step into the literary foreground. Despite this, the power they receive and the boundaries they transgress are closely invested with the memory of their dead husbands. Whilst Maryam Jazayari’s widowhood comes about through the government’s execution of her husband rather than martyrdom on the battlefield, the fate of Naneh Baran, the widow of the epitome of martyred masculinity, Baran, brings about her meteoric rise \textit{and} her fall from grace. The novel documents and critiques an absent state, which allows traditional gender roles to be broken down and renegotiated in the chaotic space created by war. As such, the lack of strong patriarchal roles, and the emergence of strong, transgressive women, is used by the novel to frame a world in crisis. Once more, frail, weak and immoral men and strong independent women who thrive on the frontline become an extended metaphor for a society in crisis.
Highly indebted to social realism and perhaps philosophically and textually less complicated than Fassih’s work, it is arguable that *Zamin-i Sukhtah* is really an attempt to document chaos rather than produce a traditional plot-driven novel. It depicts the social circumstances of the city of Ahvaz in Khuzestan during the first months of the war, as it faced an unexpected Iraqi onslaught. The popularity of the novel meant that it went through a second printing just twenty days after its original publication. The documentary style of the novel expands the view of the cityscape far beyond the experience of one or two characters and instead captures the tragedy of the whole city through vignettes and stories of personal tragedy.

Published in 1982, *Zamin-i Sukhtah* (Scorched Earth) narrates the experience of the people of Ahvaz in Khuzestan from the perspective of an individual and unnamed narrator and his family. The narrator, who is torn between the emotional need to stay in his city and also carry out his duties for his family, is left anonymous as he and his family come to stand for the universal experience of civilians surviving war. It soon becomes apparent that few members of his family are willing to leave, and as such they are all subject to the problems and tragedies which are a consequence of war. These consequences, which are revealed as the story unfolds, are outlined through death, madness, chaos and the breakdown of civil society: one of the narrator’s brothers is martyred, and another suffers a serious mental breakdown. As the war progresses, and the male characters come under siege both physically and psychologically, the male ego comes to mimic the bombed out and shrapnel-pitted city-scape in which it attempts to reside. The narrator is not just concerned with the fate of his family; he describes all aspects of the city and its wartime experience. He documents the initial incredulity of the citizens at Iraq’s attack on Iran, then their belief that the people of Khuzestan have the capability to defend their city alone. The novel is both a testament to their bravery and courage, and a realistic assessment of the struggles and tragedies which occur. It is not simply an ode to Iranian strength and valour but describes the problems of wartime. As the *Ketabshianasi Dal’a Muqaddas* (Bibliography of the Sacred Defence), asserts, the novel deals with a vast array of problems both internal and external,

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Which range from inflation, shortages, homelessness and the misdeeds of individuals who use chaos to their advantage, as well as those people who act against the revolution and fifth columnists. At the same time it points to the acts of theft, looting, rape and slaughter of war and the ad hoc trial and execution of offenders and by those individuals who are not qualified to do so and assesses the emotional toll of war on the individual. 

Part of a critically acclaimed trilogy Zamin-i Sukhtah is the final instalment of the saga of Khuzestan, written during the conflict and from Mahmud’s own experience. The novel’s five chapters adhere to a strict chronology which begins just before the start of the war and narrates the sudden, yet systematic, disintegration of the city of Ahvaz. The narrator adopts the role of war correspondent as Ahvaz is destroyed around him. A series of encounters with a number of different characters during the first days and then months of the war takes the place of a traditional plot. This literary style is not unknown in other Iran-Iraq War novels, many of which revel in non-linearity in order to more fully portray the chaos which is the setting for their fiction. Indeed, this technique is also to be found in Iraqi writing and therefore could signal the communality of experience for Iranian and Iraqi writers. As Ferial Ghazoul has observed in her review of Duna Talib’s short stories, many of which ‘start and end in medias res, permitting the reader a glance at cases rather than at their unfolding from beginning to end. Characterisation is Talib’s strong point in this collection, but the narrative plot is either absent or thin. This method is closely mirrored in Mahmud’s novel. An adherent to the socialist realist school of “committed” writers, Mahmud has been accused of writing ‘only to present his party’s policy in the form of literature. As an omniscient narrator, he leads his characters toward the party’s ideological goals. This may be true of Mahmud’s other novels, but Scorched Earth does not seem to follow this model. Indeed, Zahra Ahmadipourani echoes other critics in her review of the novel by insisting that it ‘is a realistic work - not ideological, as it present the war from multiple standpoints. There is less concern with party politics in this novel than with the simultaneously mundane and terrifying experience of real-life and its disruption by the trauma of war. The novel is largely composed of episodes which

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Buromand, p. 438
Ghazoul, ‘A Gallery of Iraqi Characters;’
Talattof, p.13
relate ‘the bombing of cities, living in shelters and cellars, migration to safe cities, social chaos, the increasing expense and rarity of merchandise, thieving and looting of empty houses.’

Despite the broader scope of interest replacing in-depth character studies, the novel’s extensive social commentary highlights the shifting relations between citizens and the state during wartime. The unruly and chaotic society which largely comes across as self-governing is presented as a recipe for disaster. Whilst at first the characters expect to hear news of an impending attack and updates on the situation, they are soon disabused of this notion as they are forced to rely on the power of rumour to inform them. The government’s inability to diffuse information, or its deliberate obfuscation of it, demonstrates a failure to protect and inform its citizens. The power vacuum this forms soon leads to the citizens of Ahvaz redirecting themselves away from reliance on state structures and bureaucracy towards reliance on community-based groups. At first the characters are clearly outraged that there is no clear and direct leadership. The only indication that there is any threat comes in the form of one short newspaper article; there is absolutely no information on how to behave in an increasingly tense atmosphere. Frustrated by the government’s silence, the first pages of the novel express bewilderment at the lack of information:

On page two of the newspaper there is an article several lines long saying that Iraqi tanks have been deployed along the Iranian border. Saber, when he saw the article said “well, if this is right why has no one said anything?”... “Who is supposed to say something?”... “The government, the supreme leader, the president...I don’t know the country’s officials”

The initial confusion is soon replaced by a fierce self-reliance, which in the absence of state rule takes the form of a series of community-based projects and groups created for self-defense in response to the Iraqi attack. In the absence of direct state control and through rhetoric which promotes extremism, the citizens of Ahvaz soon form militia groups in order to protect and govern their society. On a number of occasions the novel narrates the setting up of guerrilla and militia groups independent of government directive or intervention.

There was uproar in all of the city’s mosques and committee meetings. A line of volunteers for the frontline and guerrillas had formed opposite the mosques and the committees and grew

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Ahmadipuranari, ‘Naqd’

Mahmud, p. 8
longer moment by moment. All of whom were out of patience. People were pulling bodies from the debris of houses which had been pummelled by shells during the attack. Groups of people were here are there out of breath and covered in sweat, were hollowing out the ground to build shelters.\footnote{Mahmud, p. 50}

In the face of an external threat from an invading Iraqi force, militarised civilian groups soon emerge to fill the widening space between the state and civil society, a space which is inevitably dominated by militarised masculinities. In the absence of the government and with mounting external threats, as well as an expanding chaos, members of civil society are forced to inhabit this void. Later, it emerges that the civilians these groups claim to protect are the ones to whom they actually pose the greatest threat, as the groups enact justice through mob rule: indeed the justice they mete out seems more concerned with protecting the threatened status quo and enacting personal revenge than about the well-being of the civilians who have lent them legitimacy. The complex questions that Mahmud asks regarding vigilantism, and its role in a chaotic wartime society, soon, however, becomes blurred by gender issues as men and women are called upon to act in a zone devoid of civil society.

Azar Naficy has claimed that the status of gender in Iran-Iraq War novels is predicated upon the absence of women, an assertion which is difficult to contest with reference to this novel. As she argues, it is particularly in Ahmad Mahmud’s novels that there are ‘no main female characters,’\footnote{Naficy, p. 127} and the female characters that are present are idealised when they adhere to popular notions of silence and absence. Indeed, this novel, which is less plot-driven than other of the texts, has been specifically selected because it points to the egregious fate awaiting women who transgress the borders of their domesticity. Mahmud’s novel punishes any distortion of traditional male/female relations, even when these transgressions occur within the mobilised Islamic framework of gender which was being disseminated by the government at the time. However, the men who are embroiled in the tragedy seem to live and survive in an inverse literary world, where normative narrative codes are reversed; the best among them are depicted as dying as paramilitaries, while the worst of them seem to survive and exploit and corrupt the war-stricken cities through theft, looting and other fraudulent means. The codes of death/martyrdom that result in an absence of idealised men, and the survival of men who undermine traditional codes of male
integrity and national honour may be read as a consequence of war and the lack of logic under which war operates. As such, the absence of ideal masculinity becomes an extended social allegory that critiques the state’s handling of the crisis, and exposes Ahvaz to a demythification process when it comes to the glories of war.

The major thrust of Mahmud’s critique of the state, and its handling of the war, is tied to his critique of Islamic feminism, and the empowerment of certain groups of women over certain men. When Naneh Baran, Mahmud’s most prominent female character, fundamentally mismanages her view of justice by executing two looters without trial, Mahmud uses her to critique the state, particularly its inconsistent and chaotic handling of the proliferating yet unprofessional defence forces, which are given power over people through the barrel of a gun. The fate for Naneh Baran, and the only way that she can truly atone for her sins, is to reclaim Islam through traditional notions of female domesticity. At the end of the novel she is heard but not seen in her rooms reading aloud from the Koran in order to do penance for her transgression into masculinised public spaces of the mosque, the paramilitary committees, the frontline and the streets.

The self-governing, self-disciplining groups soon clash within the general lawlessness of society as they implement arbitrary justice. This is most forcibly demonstrated through both the prism of gender and the vigilantism that is undertaken by Naneh Baran against the looters that she executes. Her need to enact personal revenge, a concept which is largely differentiated from the national revenge the men intend to take against the Iraqis, leads Naneh Baran to transgress her proper role. As she unpicks the intertwining and often contradictory strands of gender arrangements in Iranian society and uses different strategies to serve her own beliefs and personal agendas her redemption comes through her expulsion from the masculine world, which is denoted as anything outside of the home (biruni) and her regression into the domesticized feminine space of the private (andaruni).

Though civil society imagines its own defence as universal and equal, a defence which merges and disposes with lines of class, age and gender, the novel presents a very different reality from the patriotic rhetoric. In a discussion of national defence, Mohsen, one of the narrator’s brothers in the novel, asks Saber, another of the
brothers, ““who is going to defend the homeland?”” Saber assures him confidently that everyone will. He replies, “We all will! If it’s necessary, all of us! Even the toddlers...” However, later in the novel, it soon emerges that female militia members are not deemed truly capable of carrying out the role of defender of the nation. After all, if women are combatants, who is there left to defend? Accordingly, the process through which the novel imagines civil responsibility is less than equitably divided. As such, civil responsibility within militarised contexts really only applies in practice to male participants. The rhetoric which sees Naneh Baran empowered as a citizen then has no material base. When she joins the queue to join one of the civil defence forces the recruiter tries to dismiss her.

Youths, old men and boys stood in line heel to toe awaiting their turn. “Ay baba! Why are you loitering here...That’s one more name we don’t need!” “Why aren’t you writing down women’s names?” “It is better for women to work behind the frontline,” “What are you saying, my friend...A women is like a lion...and I can fight better than you.”

In a society which both promoted and rolled back women’s rights, Naneh Baran encapsulates the fundamental contradictions of gender policy and its literary reflections in Iranian society at the beginning of the 1980s. Though Ahmad Mahmud’s war novels have been accused of having ‘no main female character,’ Naneh Baran both reinforces and undermines this damning assertion. Whilst Zamastan-i ‘62 depicts its women as both repressed and yet over-powering entities, Zamin-i Sukhtah truly displays the scope and capabilities of women empowered by wartime ideologies. Naneh Baran is the most prominently featured female character in the novel and her position as a fighter, her acceptance onto the local council and her weapons training in the local mosque could be interpreted as a sign that characters in Mahmud’s novels are able to transcend traditional gender boundaries. In fact, Naneh Baran’s character has been interpreted as a pro-feminist transcendence of the gender roles that are dictated to women. For example, Zahra Ahmadipuranari has stated that Naneh Baran is one of the most ‘independent and revolutionary individuals’ in the modern Iranian war novel.

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252 Mahmud, p. 37
253 Mahmud, p. 37
254 Mahmud, p. 50
255 Naficy, p.127
256 Ahmadipuranari, ‘Naqd’
Zahra Ahmadipuranari’s interpretation of Naneh Baran as a proto-feminist character is undoubtedly in response to her depiction as a strong female character. In contrast with the rhetoric which extols the virtue of female passivity, Naneh Baran is the female character who tests the boundaries of female participation in society and combat. She is both a prototype for the regime’s vision of women, but also becomes a figure who represents the failure of government rhetoric on modern Islamic womanhood. From the beginning of the novel she contests male power, and shames men who would force her into the home. She takes up arms, learning to shoot and fight so that she can defend herself and her community. Her transition from wife to combatant/widow is marked and permitted by her zealous adherence to the Islamic revolution and, more importantly, by the inviolable link between her position as a widow and the memory of her martyred husband. As such, in the absence of a strong patriarchal male figure in the form of her husband, Naneh Baran is able to manipulate these idealisations to propel herself towards her own social power and advancement. Mahmud thus critiques the failure of the state to step-in as the patriarchal figure, whilst simultaneously perpetuating martyrdom as the epitome of Islamic masculinity.

Naneh Baran’s husband represents the ideal man, a proponent of the masculinity by which all other men are judged. His skills on the battlefield, his religious beliefs and his bravery, establish him as the model soldier and Islamic brother. Despite his idealisation as a model citizen, soldier and masculine subject, Baran has surprisingly little autonomy over his own representation. He is almost mythical as his story is told through a mixture of rumour and legend. Much like Hussein, who ‘personifies the heroic agent of good in his struggle with the antagonistic agent of evil,’ Baran is emptied of any human qualities as he is promoted to the realm of symbolism. His legendary status begins when he is fifteen when his father is bound and gagged on a mountain pass by some thieves and left to die. From that moment on Baran marches straight to the mosque in order to learn how to fight and use a gun. As news from the battlefield arrives, it is soon announced that Baran ‘has been made a first-class commander and like a lion he attacks any infidel and unbeliever.’ Not only do his battle skills and leadership capabilities cast him as the ideal symbol of masculinity, but

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257 Mahmud, p. 197
258 Korangy, p. 529
259 Mahmud, p. 98
260 Mahmud, p. 98
his physical appearance too reinforces his mythical status. Echoing the physical depiction of Imam Hussein (examples shown below) as he appears in popular culture, Baran is described as possessing ‘a charismatic look with a large moustache and straight black hair. He has thick eyebrows and dark skin.’

Just like the images of Hussein which dominate public space and whose stylisation is rendered and used in many depictions of other martyrs, Baran’s physical appearance and his infallible character cast him as a model of Shi’a heroism, which eventually culminates in his martyrdom. Baran’s mirroring of Hussein is an important technique within the text. Just as the Karbala paradigm and the martyrdom of Hussein is an important component of Shi’a collective memory, Baran’s echoing of this myth casts him as something beyond human: the ultimate vision of masculinity. Whilst the Karbala paradigm has been manipulated throughout the ages to serve political agendas, here it serves a distinct and simple literary purpose. Through Baran’s association with the prince of martyrs he becomes invested with all the characteristics of idealised masculinity within the popular frameworks of Shi’a Islamic martyrdom.

Through the process of myth-making which relies on posthumous adulation for her husband, Naneh Baran is allowed to gain power and prestige for herself. Her successes and failures as a strong female character ultimately come to symbolise the paradoxes inherent within the revolutionary government’s discourse on women-and by implication men. The multi-faceted projection of ideal femininity and the politicisation of widowhood which is played out across the novel at times appears increasingly contradictory. Whilst mothers, sisters and daughters remain vague, shadowy figures in

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the novel, Naneh Baran as a widow is able to encapsulate and explore all the possibilities on offer in wartime society. However, her transgressions and freedoms which remain within the confines of state discourse are soon punished by the society which they are enacted upon. Naneh Baran’s lack of femininity quickly becomes a warning sign of a woman who has ‘left [her] prescribed roles...(and) joined the counter-types, the enemies against whom manliness sharpened its image.”²⁶³ Whilst depictions of widows across literature have ranged from sexually voracious to maternal and generous to socially reclusive, Naneh Baran’s adoption of the role of Islamic female fighter and supporter is perhaps the most threatening of all to masculine stability. Her transition from civilian to combatant is even physically marked by her chosen attire.

Naneh Baran is wearing military trousers. On top of the trousers she is wearing a dark-coloured woollen blouse with a high-collared and long sleeves. And instead of a headscarf she is wearing a Kafiyya the colour of a broad bean flower.²⁶⁴

According to Miriam Cooke, when women become combatants in literature they are able to ‘challenge gender norms by playing men’s roles and wearing men’s clothes or, more subtly, by refusing society’s rules for proper conduct for women. This change from observer to combatant is often erotically marked.”²⁶⁵ This is simply not the case for a character such as Naneh Baran. Her transition into masculinised roles is aided by her desire for revenge. When the state calls upon the citizens to execute looters, Naneh Baran is all too happy to comply and as such the careful balances of society, even one which is in chaos, quickly unravels. The revenge she seeks against the Iraqi enemy for killing her husband is applied to counter-types of Iranian masculinity. Her revenge is against Iranian men who are unmanly—the opposite, as she perceives it—of her husband. She equates the actions of the looter with those of the enemy and as such holds them equally responsible for the death of husband. “Us?...We martyred your husband?” Naneh Baran is calm but her voice is shaking. “Unmanly people like you!”²⁶⁷ The expectations of male behaviour which Naneh Baran sets up are specifically state-orientated, as she “others” the behaviour of men who do not conform

²⁶⁴ Mahmud, p. 252
²⁶⁶ Mahmud, p. 188
²⁶⁷ Mahmud, p. 279
to these ideals. Alternative Iranian masculinities are cast in the role of Iraqi, and thus deemed enemy. Naneh Baran’s character juxtaposes and comments upon the nature of hegemonic masculinity: First by revealing the masculine ideal to be deeply subjective, and second, despite the shifting nature of this ideal, by revealing that the absence of strong male figures is the beginning of anarchy in a society where the state cannot definitively take control.

This ideal which Naneh Baran extols, and the novel in turn glorifies, is personified by Baran. His commitment to the revolution, the war and his politico-philosophical ideals simplify and clarify the motivations and ideals of the South-Western region. Baran’s willingness to sacrifice himself for his nation and the revolution depicts him as the ultimate selfless martyr. “This duty is the historical responsibility of our generation. If we do not fight we betray ourselves, we betray our generation and we betray the revolution...We will get them out!” The vigour and fearlessness of Baran’s moral sentiments is an important axis around which the discussions of morality pivot. Whilst Baran is an infallible, flawless symbol of Iranian masculinity he is juxtaposed with male characters such as the looters and Shokri (a rather unpleasant merchant who buys stolen goods from the looters to sell on for a profit). These juxtapositions construct an ideal masculinity through a binary model that culminates in treating men within chauvinistic categories, seeing them as either hegemonic heroes or subaltern anti-heroes. Baran’s death allows Naneh to seek vengeance on those men who do not live up to his ideal: a defender of the faith and nation, a man to whom other men defer to their judgement. The process of apotheosising Baran after has been martyred creates not just an enduring legend of her venerated husband, but is also a route to the social empowerment afforded the widowed. This process of emancipation through the memory of her husband renders Naneh Baran virtually untouchable.

Ultimately Naneh Baran is shown to be incapable of handling the responsibilities of men, as she binds her loyalties to her husband and personal vengeance rather than the laws of the state and the nation. Her transgression of female boundaries soon means that she is cast back into the female religious sphere of the home, rather than the male

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268 Mahmud, p. 179-180  
269 Mahmud, p. 113  
270 Mahmud, p. 182
religious sphere of the battlefield. Naneh Baran becomes the character subject to the deepest social commentary in the novel, as we witness her transition from wife to widow and then to combatant as she attempts to seek out new social opportunities via the memory of her martyred husband. She is portrayed as a victim of the regime’s multi-layered and contradictory messages towards its female citizens, a woman punished for ultimately not deferring to male power. The consequences of her acceptance into a male-dominated arena are played out in the most violent of terms. She ultimately ends up taking justice into her own hands and executes two looters after she has judged them using her own interpretation of male standards. Naneh Baran’s actions and their consequences articulate an equal anxiety for women who draw close to the masculine, as for men who draw close to the feminine.

When Youssef Bi’yar and Ahmad Fari are caught stealing a lorry and its contents they try unsuccessfully to claim that their ill-gotten gains are really theirs. As the crowd gathers, the situation crescendoes until it is claimed that their actions are the same as those of the Iraqi enemy.

“The people shelter from bombing, shelling and missile attacks as they defend themselves against the kingdom, and during that time you pussies go from street to street and loot their houses!” “But the last house belonged to Haj Mussib who...” “It doesn’t make any difference.” “We must execute them!”

The empowerment of widows as they morph into extensions of their husbands not only empowers widows to transgress traditional gender boundaries, but it also divests them of any direct responsibility. This process of apotheosis that is called upon by Naneh Baran allows her to become her husband’s social stand-in. In essence, the female power she displays is entirely derived from a male patriarchal base. The respect, prestige and power that she gains, is entirely derived from her legendary husband. Accordingly it can be convincingly argued that her appropriation of his power is ultimately a failed attempt to ensure the continuity of patriarchal power. She punishes the looters not for their crimes but her belief in their failure to live up to the masculine ideal personified by Baran. This failure is perceived as a direct insult to his memory, and a possible cause of his death. The looters’ moral actions and their criminal activity become intertwined with discourses on gender, as immorality is

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a Mahmud, p. 272
b Pinsdorf, (2002)
conflated with unmanliness. The failure to live up to the idealised masculinity symbolised by Baran immediately transitions the pejoratively unmanly behaviour of the looters into the behavioural realm of the Iraqi. In the absence of a direct Iraqi enemy the actions of the looters become a prism through which revenge against the unmanly Iraqi is taken by Naneh Baran.

Perhaps of all the novels *Zamin-i Sukhtah* presents Iraqi masculinity in the most regressive of terms. Whilst Saddam Hussein is often referred to as a dog or a son of a bitch in nearly all of the Iranian novels (and even in some of the Iraqi novels) the close knit religious and ethnic ties between South-Western Iran and Eastern Iraq has meant that novels often exclude the Iraqi population in the abstract from criticism altogether. However, *Zamin-i Sukhtah* often describes Iraqi masculinity as cowardly and opportunistic as it calls upon an Iranian identity to protect itself. Discussions of Iraqi psychology, character and motivation are undertaken in the most general terms as a nation-state becomes a singular entity which can be deconstructed by the vast plethora of bit players in the novel. The conclusions that are drawn from these discussions, particularly in reference to significant events such as the attack on the undefended city of Khorramshahr, the treatment of prisoners of war\(^{273}\) and the interference by fifth columnists\(^{274}\) are all focussed through a framework of manliness. The superior technology and access to modern weapons held by the Iraqis is perceived as an unmanly way to fight wars. The Iraqi soldiers are seen as hiding behind a technology that gives them the advantage.

“Of course we are fighting with everything we’ve got! But those cowardly bastards haven’t budged. They are still striking the city with missiles and shells.” Baran stood to face Fazel and said, “Yes...they are still striking us and they haven’t moved us! How long can weaklings and unmanly bastards tolerate it? Especially when they are afraid of our children and turn tail and run when they appear, as they run away never to return they throw their weapons on the ground and put their hands in the air.” \(^{275}\)

As the situation escalates and execution is suggested as a punitive measure, it becomes clear that the justification for this to be found in the dictates of revolutionary rules.

\(^{273}\) Mahmud, p. 180
\(^{274}\) Mahmud, p. 91
\(^{275}\) Mahmud, p. 180-181
Whilst the looters plead to be taken in the custody of the authorities and take refuge in the law, Mohammed the mechanic says: “The law?!...The word of the people is the law! The revolution is the law! My war has its own law!”

After Naneh Baran has carried out the execution of Yusuf Biya’ar, she is arrested and held in custody at the mosque. The only chance for her to be saved from the masculine punishment is through an appeal to the feminine. When the women come to the mosque to appeal to Haj Itiekhar and the other members of the Pasadaran, they augment their femininity and their roles as wives and mothers to save Naneh Baran and her fellow executioner, the young teenager, ‘Adel. The protesting crowd is composed of women who exalt in their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters, who adorn themselves in the traditional clothing of Shi’a Islam (the chador) which denotes ideals of modesty, chastity and virtue. In order for their voices to be heard and their wishes granted women must conform to a mould of idealized femininity. When it is announced by Haj Itiekhar that Naneh Baran is to be sent to the revolutionary court for justice, ‘Adel’s mother appeals to both her own role as a mother and the sacrifices her husband and her other son have made for the nation.

Hajj Eftekhar, you yourself know that my husband and son Mosaddeq, both of them are prisoners of war...now, my only other child has now been imprisoned...How much more shame can I bear?²⁷⁶

Among the protesters outside the mosque where ‘Adel and Naneh Baran are being held captive, we find Gulabtun’s sister, described previously as always wearing her hair loose, now wearing a chador.²⁷⁷ The revocation of the feminine in order to appeal to masculine sensibilities soon condemns all the women to rely on their feminine wiles. Whilst female characters such as Naneh Baran and Gulabtun’s sister have flirted with the masculine world, it is to the feminine world that they are ultimately expelled. Their punishment and redemption belong to the internal world of the feminine. Whilst Gulabtun’s sister is given to Mirza-Ali in matrimony,²⁷⁸ Naneh Baran takes up her role as a secluded widow in mourning. When she is released she retreats back into the internal world of her home, the traditional sphere of the female in Iranian society and learns the Koran in an act of ablution for her crime.

²⁷⁶ Mahmud, p. 290
²⁷⁷ Mahmud, p. 289
²⁷⁸ Mahmud, p. 301
What had happened that she suddenly was pushed into going and learning the Koran? She gave a guarantee that if she was released from prison she would completely change. Was Naneh Baran feeling guilty?...Did she feel that she had killed someone?...or that she had taken her husband’s vengeance?...When Naneh Baran was released from prison she did not go again to the council. She seldom left the house and sometimes when I was lying in bed I heard her voice reciting the Qu’ran:

"لا تحسن الذين كفروا"

Her redemption and social acceptance can only be retrieved from a strict interpretation of femininity within a religious context. Naneh Baran displays the virtues of a respectable, pious woman. However, even her seclusion serves a political agenda. She serves her revolutionary values by both masculine and feminine methods, but it is her feminine role that is idealized and her masculine appropriation that is ultimately punished. As such, the voices of female characters are only successfully narrated through their performances of idealized femininity and their adherence to the role of either wife, mother, daughter or sister. The polarised vision of Islamic femininity is shown to be a fallacy by Mahmud, as gentle, child-bearing, modest women are heavily idealised and are juxtaposed against the masculine and dangerously unstable female combatant. The autonomy of the citizens of Ahvaz, which has virtually been abandoned by the government, creates the perfect storm in the portrayal of its gender relations. As female characters such as Naneh Baran and Gulabtun’s sister use the war and government rhetoric to transgress their female role, the reality for the disconnected male citizens is that women are incapable of performing such roles. In a self-disciplining society without structure it becomes the duty of women to reformulate their roles, marrying both government and social ideals.

Neither *Zamin-i Sukhtah* nor *Zamastan-i ‘62* sets out to moralise on the war or create a polemic in their work. Both novels refocus their work away from the political realm of state policy and concentrate on the daily lives of citizens living in a warzone. Both novels describe an interaction between citizen and soldier and create fluid interactions between the quotidian and the frontline. Both novels privilege a narrative of masculinity which reifies hegemonic fraternal male relations, whilst simultaneously linking the decline of society under war time conditions to narratives of patriarchal decline. The degeneration of patriarchal characters however, does not necessarily

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80 Mahmud, p. 315
promote universal male equality through fraternity, as is seen by the punitive handling of “other” men, and nor does it signal the universal empowerment of female characters, as is indicated by the harsh treatment and representation of transgressive female figures like Naneh Baran.

As the reader becomes embroiled in a chaotic disintegration of the city, the failure of men to protect and maintain civil society through state structures results in death, madness, depicting the empowerment of women as a heinous consequence of a lack of civil society. Naneh Baran, manipulates government narratives wreaking havoc on traditional social structures. Her redemption and penance is found through her reintroduction to the female sphere as the novel tries to mend and understand male power relations through community processes rather than through traditional patriarchal structures. Accordingly critiques of the state, which are at the heart of the texts, are represented not only as a manifestation of male crisis but also as a consequence of empowered femininity. This narrative of gender and power is continued in the Iraqi texts in this chapter, where, in the face of state power, masculinity is doomed to failure. In ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser’s collection of short-stories, the image of female dominance emerges as the subjugator of male power, and points to an authoritarian world in which economically disadvantaged men are unable to resist the sexual power of women. Sattar’s collection, like Fassih and Mahmud’s novels warps idealised versions of masculinity and produces gender narratives as criticisms of the state.

3.3: ‘ABD AL-SATTAR NASSER: MATAR TAHT AL-SHAMS (RAIN UNDER THE SUN)

‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser is perhaps best known in Iraq, and around the world, because of the treatment he suffered at the hands of the Ba’thist regime. After publishing a short story called Sayyida al-Khalifa in 1975, a parody of authoritarian power wielded by a figure closely resembling Saddam Hussein, he was imprisoned by the regime for more than a year, much of which he spent in solitary confinement.280 The experience of the punitive measures of life under dictatorship, as well as the poverty-stricken district that

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he grew up in as a child, have been the two major thematic forces shaping his work, and as such they are also the source of much of their controversy. Nasser’s frank discussion of poverty and prostitution, rooted in his own experience of growing up in a deprived Baghdad neighbourhood, form the setting of much of his oeuvre. These discussions also lie at the heart of his earlier short-story collections. It is particularly his collection of short stories published in 1987 which forms the focus of the following analysis. This short-story collection, along with the other Iraqi novels analysed here, is concerned with society and its relationship with the state; and it is this theme that is privileged over all others. Of all of the fiction in this study this is the body of work least involved with the war. Nevertheless, like the other Iraqi novels, at the heart of its stories lie critiques of the state. These critiques take the form of gendered narratives because in the face of state power, normative masculinity fails. Apart from the exploitative and corrupt ‘thman al-Fiqh, there are no successful male characters. It is particularly interesting that out of Nasser’s fiction there emerges an image of the feminine as the subjugator of male power, a power frequently represented as unnatural, and one reflecting the state’s authoritarian practices.

*Matar taht al-Shams* (Rain Under the Sun) was published in Cairo in 1987 whilst Nasser still lived in Iraq. Though published abroad, the collection is very subtle in its examination of Nasser’s favoured themes. These themes, which form the major focus of both Nasser’s earlier and later work, are dealt with extreme subtlety, no doubt to protect the author from once again risking incarceration. This subtlety, like many examples found in Iraqi literature, relies upon a mimetic process in which stylistic choices favour magical realism. For many of the characters, supernatural moments, such as ‘thman al-Fiqh’s alliance with the insects, are integrated into the ordinary thereby evading direct interaction with Iraqi society whilst relentlessly mimicking it. In addition this, Nasser’s fiction employs allegorical tools to examine the themes of dictatorship and governance, once again as a method of evading direct interaction with the government it intends to depict. The most common of these allegorical motifs in this collection is the changing weather; the author uses the pathetic fallacy to convey and link the relationship of each of his narrators with their increasingly oppressive surroundings.

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81 Ibid.
Whilst Nasser attempts to convey in his collection the links between poverty, dictatorship and society, another, perhaps unintentional, consequence of such an enterprise inevitably has specific consequences for the gendered nature of his characters. Like so much of Arabic fiction, Nasser’s socially and politically conscious writing places some constraining determinants upon the gendered aspects of his characters. Just as this sense of male crisis has defined and determined many of the representations of male characters discussed in the previous section; likewise it appears in Nasser’s fiction. However, whilst the war forms the definitive catalyst for a crisis of masculinity in the two Iranian novels by Mahmud and Fassih, here the sense of male crisis is attributed to three determinants: female sexuality, poverty and dictatorship. The single most important frame for Nasser’s critique is the attachment that all the male characters have with traditional ideas of manhood understood through patriarchy. This notion is understood by these male characters as all men possessing power over all women, and given the cast of strong female characters, is an attachment which ultimately fails. Moreover, it is poverty, female sexuality and authoritarian government which prevent his male characters from obtaining the elusive prize of undisputed manhood, in which male sexuality is successfully satisfied and linked to control over the female characters. The inability and failure of all the male characters in this collection of short-stories to control women, be virile, present and active in the society that the collection depicts, embeds Nasser’s fiction in political commentary. Like the two previous Iranian novels, this commentary registers a national and social crisis through the failure of masculinity. It is this notion of crisis which becomes the driving force in this short-story collection as morality and notions of ideal masculinity become deeply entrenched in the realm of hegemonic masculinity.

The first story in the collection, ‘A Child-like Man’, establishes this deep connection between morality and sexuality as the narrator’s notions of male honour are threatened when he is asked by his best friend, a character we know as Hassun, to escort his wife, Ikram, to Kuwait to escape the war. Hassun, who the narrator eventually ends up murdering in order to take possession of the wife, is portrayed as a naïve man - a trait which initially keeps him safe from the narrator’s ill intentions. The narrator likens his betrayal of Hassun to killing a ‘mischievous but innocent boy’, and repeatedly warns Hassun about his evil nature. ‘How do you know I am a trust-worthy man? Your wife

Nasser, p. 11
is small and pretty. Why would you leave her with a dog like me? However, after a heavy night of drinking, Hassun falls asleep, and the narrator, instead of leaving the house, enters Ikram’s room and masturbates next to her while she is asleep. The next morning when the narrator wakes up he agrees to Hassun’s request to accompany Ikram to Kuwait out of guilt over the transgression he has committed underneath Hassun’s roof the previous night. Once the narrator has assented to Hassun’s request, the tension between his desire for Ikram and the moral duty of friendship that he owes Hassun is thrown into sharper relief when Hassun insists that the pair travel as husband and wife. Within the context of the narrator’s heightened sexual struggle, he perceives this bureaucratic pretence as a transfer of sexual ownership.

Hassun stirred me up the first time he informed me: “I don’t need to tell you buddy that Ikram will have to travel with you as your wife. So you can act rough with her and take matters in hand in front of the police anywhere….She knows her role in this game and won’t put up a fight….You know the nature of people in an Arab country, if they know that she is not your wife…..”

Up to this point in the story, Ikram has remained a two-dimensional figure, a mere sum of currency of sexual exchange between the two male characters, perfectly mirroring the process of male literary rivalry described by René Girard in his discussion of mimetic rivalries. However, this process is soon destroyed by the emergence of Ikram as a powerful female figure. Ikram’s separation from Hassun offers her the opportunity to establish her own sense of agency, and establishes a power structure in which she dominates both her husband and the narrator. At the beginning of the journey she is described by the narrator:

She was twenty years old-feminine, innocent and gentle. She was sitting near my hand, I didn’t know what to say in her presence. I had seen her night after night in Hassun’s house and despite this, I had never uttered a single word to her other than “goodnight.”

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283 Nasser, p. 10
284 Nasser, p. 12
285 Nasser, p. 13-14
287 Nasser, p. 17
next."... (The request) didn’t destroy her femininity, her gentleness assaulted and taunted me."

Her sexual hold over the narrator evolves as the journey towards Kuwait continues. As her power over the narrator grows, his responsibility, judgement and link to his male identity, in which he prioritises loyalty to his friend over sexual satisfaction, are increasingly diminished. No longer simply a commodity, Ikram develops from passive conduit for Hassun’s honour into an emasculating force of her own. In this sense, she evolves from a sexual commodity to a sexual powerhouse typical of Arabic literature in which ‘the female, defined by her gender, is made to enter the pantheon of adab character types largely through her witty manipulation of the body.’

Ikram’s path is one well-trodden by female characters in the modern Arabic novel. As she progresses from victim to temptress, she encompasses and constitutes danger, inherent in the body of the female character. She pulls the narrator away from his duty as a homosocial fraternal male character rendering him emasculated and in thrall to female sexuality. Hassun and the narrator’s behaviour, and the subsequent juxtaposition of male honour and sexual desire, operate as a rejection of traditional models of Arab masculinity which insist that:

Homosocial competition and the violent hierarchies structuring the relationships between men themselves constitute the core of what it means to be a man in the Middle East and North Africa. Because women are not the centre of men’s experiences (other men are), misogyny is actually fuelled by something deeper—by the fear of emasculation by other men, the fear of humiliation, the fear of not being so manly.

On the other hand, however, the fate of the narrator is determined by his inability to take flight from the female body. The narrator’s refusal to succumb to the temptations of Ikram’s body represents a desire to maintain his masculinity; and his failure to do so reveals that in contrast with Ouzgane’s assertion outlined above, the narrator equates masculinity with a notion of male honour which resists femininity. The narrator’s manliness is already in question. When he first boards the train, a ticket

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*Nasser, p. 20


Lahoucine Ouzgane, ‘The Rape Continuum: Masculinities in Ben Jelloun’s and El Saadawi’s Works,’ in *Men in African Fiction and Film*, (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2011) 68-83 (p. 69)
collector requests to see the narrator’s military service record book; the other replies: “This is not the face of a man who is deserting the army.” The implication is two-fold: that he has neither the physical appearance to look as if he could belong to the army, nor the strength of character to desert it. It is this weakness which the ticket collectors recognises in him because he does not and has not participated in the war, that foreshadows his failure to resist Ikram’s wiles. This collection is an important one for 1980s Iraqi fiction because it discusses Iraqi politics and society from inside the country. However, it distances its observations from the society it intends to depict by relying on: firstly, magical realism as a literary style; and secondly, patterns of gender in which gender becomes a conduit for social critique.

Ikram’s wiles, which come in the form of honeyed words and sexual promises, underpin dominant narratives of female sexuality prevalent in Arabic and Persian literature; these cite insatiable female heterosexual desire as the ultimate threat to male power. As Afsaneh Najmabadi notes in her discussion of ‘wiles-of-women’ stories: ‘at its simplest, the plot involves a young man, an older and often more powerful woman (mother/step-mother) who is infatuated with the young man and attempts to seduce him. His refusal to submit to her sexual advances (often he is tempted, yet loyalty to other men prompts his rejection) then makes him the target of her intrigues, which often arise from her insidious speech.” Whilst some elements the plot of Sattar’s first story are at variance with this trope, in general outline the story roughly mirrors the formula. After the narrator has initially refused to succumb to Ikram’s wiles, out of the loyalty that he feels for his friend Hassun, he eventually falls victim to her insatiable sexuality. The narrator justifies this not through his sexual desire for Ikram, but because he begins to believe that Hassun has called upon him to escort Ikram to Kuwait, not to escape the war, but instead to make money as a prostitute for her husband.

This supposed deception by Hassun assaults the honour of the narrator. In forcing the narrator to transport his merchandise rather than a vessel of his honour, Hassun, the narrator believes, soon decides the outcome of his internal debate regarding his loyalty to his friend. Ikram’s accusation that she has is being forced into prostitution by her husband is a plausible one. After all, in a world in which female bodies are vessels for

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291 Nasser, p. 18
292 Najmabadi, p.155
male honour, by allowing his wife to travel to Kuwait with another man, Hassun has already failed to carry out his duty as her guardian, and failed to invest his honour in her body, instead using it as a source of income. With the justification that Hassun has tricked the narrator into aiding and abetting his lack of honour, the narrator cuts all ties of loyalty to Hassun and ties his fate to Ikram. The pair never arrive in Kuwait; and when the narrator is found by Hassun in a suburb of Basra, the narrator kills him, an act which becomes the ultimate source of homosocial betrayal. Framing the beginning and the end of the story is a song the narrator sings of Hassun, when he realises that he has been enslaved to Ikram’s body: “Oh! Mr Hassun, your world this woman does betray, and you in love with her, grief and madness make.” The song points both to his own downfall at the hands of female sexuality, and to his own inevitable demise at the hands of Ikram’s sexual power. The fate that he sings of, which he references to Hassun, can just as easily be read as a reference to his own destiny. The very last line of the story draws a parallel between the two men: ‘Ikram became my wife, but they prevented me from travelling (outside of Iraq.)” Once again, a chain of events is set in motion in which union with Ikram prevents her husband from having the freedom to cross borders and boundaries, a phenomenon which is never explained and exists as an allegorical device to further demonstrate her almost supernatural power over men. This fundamental right which has been afforded men and denied women in traditional Islamic cultures, entraps the male narrator in feminine spaces thereby establishing a narrative about the plight of masculinity when overcome by female sexuality, a sexuality which eschews the traditional virtues of female domesticity, absence from public view and silence. Instead these qualities are transferred onto Hassun, and if the meaning of the framing ditty at the beginning and the end of the story is appropriately extrapolated, it will be the fate of the narrator as well. This notion of freedom to move across borders, cities and nations is one which has been the exclusive preserve of men, whilst women have traditionally been confined to ‘spatial constraints of femaleness.”

The story acts as a warning of what will happen to men if they refuse to conform to fixed but undefined concepts of masculinity, particularly with regard to the link

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293 Nasser, p. 8
294 Nasser, p. 47
between female sexuality and male honour. Hassun is killed because of his flexible notions of male honour. By allowing his wife to travel with an unrelated man, he fails to conflate Ikram’s body with notions of his own honour thus leading to his own demise. Equally, the fate of the narrator is foretold, as he in turn becomes bound to Ikram’s sexual power. Unlike the male characters to which Fedwa Malti-Douglas and Afsaneh Najmabadi refer in their analysis of pre-modern Islamicate story cycles, the narrator in Sattar’s short story is lost and unable to find redemption in female sexuality. This mode, in which male honour is both juxtaposed with and contains dominant female sexuality, is not successfully adhered to by any of the male characters found in this collection of the author’s short stories. Sattar then links this failed masculinity to the relationship that these men have with poverty, dictatorship and society. Female sexuality therefore comes to symbolize the ills of society. As such, it is the inability of masculinity to resist its onslaught which is the subject of Sattar’s critique. The theme linking masculinity, female sexuality and society is interwoven throughout the whole short story collection and has its roots particularly in Sattar’s comments on dictatorship. For Sattar, the authoritarian dictatorship in his short stories is feminine, and his characters’ masculinities, which are unable to resist it any form, becomes the major allegorical force in the construction of his literature.

Of these feminine/female dictators who dominate this collection of short-stories, it is particularly Sattar’s representation of Zaynab in the short-story ‘Family Honour’ which most clearly indicates the literary tension between a crisis of masculinity in society and the domination of female sexuality at its core. ‘Family Honour’, one of the final stories in the collection, tells the tale of a destitute family who barely make ends meet renting rooms in a squalid district of Baghdad. One night when the teenage narrator’s aunt is giving birth, and it is raining heavily (as already mentioned, a significant and recurring motif of subservience and oppression in the collection), a woman who is looking for a room comes to the house. The woman, named Zaynab, tells the family that she has come from the North and is a war widow. At first the narrator’s father is concerned that the lone woman is a prostitute, and though he turns out to be right, he and the rest of the family no longer care once Zaynab begins to buy them gifts, clothes and generally allow them luxuries that they were never able to afford before her arrival.
However, in return for her generous contributions to the family income, ‘Zaynab became the overlord with unlimited power over the household.’ The narrator recognises that the family is acting immorally by allowing Zaynab to commit immoral acts. The family’s method for dealing with Zaynab’s prostitution is to deny its existence and use its profits to fund the lifestyle to which they quickly become accustomed:

As far as we were concerned Zaynab was our winning ticket, a way for us to create a perfect life...Zaynab became our whole income, and we in turn, acquiesced to everything. We lied to ourselves that she didn’t spend the nights in brothels..."**

Zaynab's position as the household’s sole source of power elevates her to the level of dictator, a position which is extremely precarious. Her vulnerability and her wish to be loved humanises her in this story. It is interesting to note here that whilst the male dictator remains an elusive, absent and intangible figure in the stories, both within this collection and the texts which form the Iraqi analysis in this study, the female figure is rounded and human. The only powerful male present in this collection is a slum lord named ‘thman Al-Fiqh, in the short story ‘The Secret Rooms.’ Unlike Zaynab, he is a mystical figure connected to the fantastic, who seems to possess supernatural qualities in conjunction with the economic and capitalist power that he wields over his poverty-stricken subjects. Zaynab, however is a pitiable figure, who buys her affection for as much as she herself is bought, unlike the absent patrician who is both terrifying and ethereal in the dislocated power that he holds.

‘Family Honour’ diverges radically from other Iraqi texts which focus on contesting the patriarchal nature of the authoritarian dictator. The spectre of the disembodied but omniscient masculine dictator is both everywhere and nowhere in contrast with the tangible and rounded humanity of female dominated spheres of power. Her death is the final stage in the process of demythification, a process which is never forced onto the only powerful male figure, ‘thman al-Fiqh. ‘thman al-Fiqh has the power to summon swarms of insects to attack his opponent when they enter his secret rooms, a phenomenon which is never fully explained. As such, whilst ‘thman al-Fiqh escapes justice through magical realist devices, the female figure is grounded in the ordinariness of daily life. Her power is soon dispersed as she dies and her subjects start to forget about her almost immediately:

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** Nasser, p. 116
** Ibid.
Feminine power, as is demonstrated by how soon Zaynab is forgotten when she dies, quickly dissipates when it is passed through a process of demythification. Once the men in the household in this story are willing to give up economic reliance, they are able to regain their lost status within the household. It is, however, telling that the male figure who breaks the economic relationship with Zaynab is not the father, who was previously in control, but his son, who also uses Zaynab’s body for his sexual pleasure. The female dictator is contemptible; her rise to power constitutes a critique of the masculinities which have failed to contain and chastise her; she is a product of poverty and a twisted society. This close alignment between the dominion of capital, sexual economy and femininity closely links the thematic tropes of Nasser’s critiques of Iraqi society. As the narrator in ‘Family Honour’ reports, Zaynab ‘did not consider doing anything else, even though it was not an occupation equal to her, rather it was the easiest way-in a country like this-to build houses, buy cars and avoid paying state taxes.’ The family’s immoral exploitation of Zaynab’s sexuality, which is both her power and her downfall, is a prism through which the story constructs a critique of Iraqi society, a society which accepts economic reliance on a debauched dictatorship because no one dare disturb the stability the authoritarian dictator provides. Whilst we never see, learn or hear any mention of Saddam Hussein in this, or any of the other texts in this study, his presence, like that of the war that he instigated, is felt throughout the fiction.

The power of the female figure, which appears over and over again in Sattar’s stories, displaces masculinity as the major source of power in the society it purports to depict. In Sattar’s stories the power of the female divests the men of their responsibilities as they become enthralled by her sexual power. Inevitably, these men doom themselves through their failure to resist her. Just as the narrator in the “The Child-like Man’

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*Samir al-Sharif, ‘Abd al-Sattar Nasser wa al’atiraf al-adab,*
<http://www.alnoor.se/article.asp?id=59604> [Accessed 02/10/12]

*Nasser, p. 120*
dooms himself to repeat Hassun’s mistakes, in ‘Rain Under Sun,’ the story from which the collection takes its name, the narrator attempts to justify his crimes because they were undertaken at the behest of a woman. The narrator, accused of rape, murder, theft and dismembering a corpse, takes the court through a confused and contradictory train of events the night before his execution. This non-linear narrative reveals that he has committed the most egregious of crimes in a district of Baghdad. At first the excused says:

Madame, I swear, I am a truly simple man, how can you believe what they say about me. Am I not a person of flesh and blood? I had not been in the alley in which Aboud died for two years. I don’t know where Mrs Nizak’s house is among the other houses of the neighbourhood. I have not drunk tea in Haj Hassun’s café for many long months and I have forgotten what the butcher even looks like."

His denials are slowly revealed to be a falsehood and instead he chooses to defend himself by explaining to his audience that these crimes were undertaken on behalf of a woman, Rasha, with whom he is obsessively in love. Rasha, who receives no agency from the text, is accorded the power to divest him of all responsibility.

I have said dozens of times that I am a simple man, why am I burdened when my mind and body are not strong enough? It is enough that she withdrew her bed from me until I did what she asked..."

By the end of the narrative he admits to all his crimes and more, and he begs the court to help him. His emotional powerlessness contrasts with the physical power that he describes employing in the execution of his crimes. His weakness to resist Rasha exposes a fundamental notion which underpins the whole of Sattar’s collection. In documenting the failure of masculinity to resist femininity and to adhere to a specific yet ambiguous moral code, the reader begins to understand that Sattar is less interested in the physical characteristics which are attributed to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, than the interior world of male narrators in crisis. These internal worlds, which narrate the ills of female domination, social oppression and poverty from almost exclusively first person perspectives, form the basis on which hegemonic masculinity is constituted, that is, through apophasis, or negation, by what it is not. In short, hegemonic masculinity is depicted through its failure. Unlike Zamin-i

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*Nasser, p. 141
*Nasser, p. 145
Sukhtah, where Baran is set up as the ideal of manliness, these stories provide no such figure, working instead through a process of “othering” in order to denote social decline through hegemonic absence.

The exception to this internalising first-person narrative technique is reserved for the tale which relates the story of a neighbourhood terrorised by a woman’s dog. No one says anything or complains about the dog out of respect for the woman’s husband who helps everyone in the neighbourhood:

    However, Mrs N’s dog despite the fact that it was filthy, malevolent and hated the children in our neighbourhood. It was one of Mrs N’s family... Mr N who helped us in past days by sneaking us medicines to rescue our children and protect them from jaundice, chest infections and polio and distributed sugar, wheat and tea to the poor in our neighbourhood... We felt that it would not be easy to for a kind man like him to defame him beloved.\(^{30}\)

When the dog mauls a little girl, however, her brother decides to kill the dog in order to end its reign of terror. When the woman hears that her dog is dead she is distraught and offers a reward to anyone who can identify the dog’s killer.

Despite the terror that the dog has rained down upon the neighbourhood, the whole district turns out to collect the reward and reveal the name of the boy who ended their misery. The boy is never seen again but the woman inevitably gets another dog, one possibly worse than its predecessor. This simple tale told by an omniscient narrator is a short allegorical tale which engages in an illuminating if veiled discussion of dictatorship. For Sattar, the demise of the dog and the willingness of the people to reveal the name of the boy who liberated them from it, signals a cyclical process which is inescapable in a society which has been formed through authoritarian power.

Unlike the other texts, which imagine the dictatorship as exclusively feminine, here Sattar links his visions of dictatorship to non-human aspects. The use of the dog and its connection with the female owner serves obvious ends: the rise of dictatorship which is both female and non-human, as has already been argued, is a fault laid at the door of weakened masculinity. The dog-owner’s husband, the neighbourhood’s great philanthropist, is shown to be a failure. He can neither resist his wife nor wield masculine power to serve the neighbourhood which he so diligently supports. Like the husband in the short story ‘Woman from the Rain’ the failure of husbands to wield

\(^{30}\)Nasser, p. 49
conjugal power results in terrible outcomes. For Mr N in ‘Another Dog’, he fails the neighbourhood and the citizens who respect him. In ‘Woman from the Rain’ the husband is subjugated by his wife who is held in thrall to the rain, and who in turn dictates his reaction to the rain as well. ‘Selwa did not say a word in the presence of the rain. It ruled her and commanded her to obey it. Since I married her, the rain competed with me for her.’

This rain, which the narrator and his wife have named “al-Matar al-Nabil” or “Noble Rain”, possesses a supernatural power over Selwa, who is forced to revel in it whenever it comes down. The rain, reflecting the title of the work as a whole, is a persistent theme signalling both oppressive forces and possible avenues of escape for Sattar’s characters. The rain in ‘Woman from the Rain,’ is another manifestation of the non-human aspects of Sattar’s representations of dictatorship. The treatment of dictatorship through pathetic fallacy serves to strengthen the link between dictatorship and an assault on masculinity as it is linked to inhumanity both in its physical and allegorical manifestations. The rain, which signals the appearance of all the wily, sexually powerful women in this collection, including Zaynab, Ikram and Rasha, also serves as an all-encompassing non-human authoritarian power. Uniquely unpredictable and omniscient, the rain becomes symbolic of the processes of authoritative power. In the case of Selwa in ‘Woman from the Rain’, the effect the rain has on her and the narrator, who is her husband, is a microscopic study of dictatorship as she has to cater to every whim that it brings down upon her.

The use of non-human figures to study the effects of oppression and dictatorship in both ‘The Woman from the Rain’ and ‘The Other Dog’ acts as a shield to protect the author from accusations of dissent against the regime. Non-human figures serve to create distance between Sattar and his criticisms, as they are used to weave an allegorical shield both to avoid punitive measures and protect his writing from intrusion by the regime. The awareness that Sattar has of the outside world and its presence within his text can be felt all the way through his collection. It could be convincingly argued that because of the subjective process through which books and stories are allowed to be read and published, there are always three shifting but interactive actors working on Sattar’s texts at any one time which deeply and profoundly shape the direction of this collection. There is of course Sattar himself; there is the audience; and perhaps more ominously, there is the single and highly...

Nasser, p. 53
subjective censor. It is this final presence which forces Sattar to construct his critiques of dictatorship through veiled, yet powerful allegories shaped by the style and with language of magical realism and hidden through clever yet deeply misogynistic narratives of gender and male crisis. This presence of the censor is so powerful that it almost co-authors the text; Sattar is forced to make stylistic choices in order to outwit the censor. His use of magical realism constructs a world which is sufficiently far removed from reality to protect Sattar from accusations of mirroring reality but powerful enough in that it constructs a world of such conviction that its construct reflects powerful allegorical forces. The rain creates a point of entry between two worlds in which the “real”, world which the texts purport to depict, is balanced and veiled by the magical, mirroring methods of later feminist Iranian novels such as Shahrnush Parsipur’s ground breaking novel *Women Without Men.* However, these moments in which reality is stretched and compressed, also act as moments which signal authoritarianism as a crisis of masculinity.

3.4: Betool Khedairi: Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!! (A Sky So Close)

Betool Khedairi’s novel *A Sky So Close* heavily features literary strategies conventional to Iraqi literature and devised to discuss Iraqi society and the war. This text, despite its substantial links to the diaspora, both through the location of its author and the location of its main character, observes Iraqi society by using literary devices such as veiled allegories and silence. Like Nasser, Khedairi’s narrator makes allusions to censorship and state strategies of coercion rather than tackling them explicitly. This deployment of silence, absence and the refusal to directly refer to or name Saddam Hussein, is not so much used as a strategy to evade censorship, since this novel was written in diaspora, as an adherence to a tradition, a continuation of well-established modes of Iraqi literary convention, which were developed in response to state censorship. Unlike Nasser, for whom it was imperative to employ strategies of censorship evasion, Khedairi lives and writes from within the diaspora. Accordingly, her use of these conventions has not been driven by a need to evade censorship and punishment but rather, by a desire to locate her work within a unique framework of Iraqi literary convention. Arguably, the most interesting of the narrative methods

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Khedairi employs the ‘story-within-a-story,’ a familiar dramatic device that distances the author from, in this case, a ballet’s veiled and allegorical critique of the war and the authoritarian nature of the regime. As Muhsin al-Musawi notes in his work,

Indirection as a way to escape censorship flourished. A salient example of this is the one narrated in *A Sky So Close*. The dance performance at the National Theatre was called *Light*. “The first group prospered blessed by a gentle golden sun, unaware that the other group was coming down with disease, as their sun was hidden away by a thick cloud in the shape of a giant mushroom...” “They were separated by a river. The dancers were divided into two groups fighting for light. The performance used every technique of lighting and shadows, we are told, to show that ‘light was a gift for everyone and didn’t belong to one group or the other.’” Playing on the gift of light, the performance enabled each pair of eyes to shine in the darkness to allow the audience to see and perceive the ravages of war and the danger threatening life because of it.\(^\text{60}\)

This self-reflexivity of ‘the-play-within-a-play’ not only reveals the obvious focus of resistance in Khedairi’s text, but is also instrumental in positioning Khedairi’s novel as a quintessentially Iraqi novel. The text’s literary style and technique is developed as a result of, and through the imposition of, censorship as a lived experience. Like other Iraqi novels written from within the diaspora, this relationship with censorship, even when it is self-reflexive, is indicative of a classic Iraqi literary device. As Brigitte Voykowitsch observes in her book review of the translated version of the novel, ‘the 37-year-old Iraqi-born author wrote her first book, a coming-of-age novel drawing on her own experiences and set against the background of the Iran-Iraq War as well as the first Gulf War, without mentioning Saddam even once.’\(^\text{39}\) However, as I have already noted, this does not necessarily divest the novel of political meaning. The fact is that none of the Iraqi novels analysed in this study mention Saddam Hussein by name, not once. Instead, like so many dictators, he maintains his power and sense of omnipotence through presence and absence. This is no different in *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba*!! The narrator is constantly in the presence of the dictator and the oppressive cultural environment that he has created without naming or acknowledging his presence explicitly; and she locates her fiction away from the realm of political tracts.

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\(^{60}\) al-Musawi, p. 85

However, Khedairi’s choice to draw on Iraqi fiction for her style, themes, tropes and narrative, inevitably shapes the novel’s possible representation of masculinities. The novel employs masculinities as part of a wider social and political allegory, in which men are forced into crisis in order to accurately render the oppressive nature of life under Saddam. As with Nasser’s collection of short stories, *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!!* also narrates an experience of gender and masculinity as a relationship in crisis, a crisis which is inherently bound to notions of nationalism, brotherhood and the renegotiation of male relations in times of war. Despite the reconstitution of male relations from patriarchal to fraternal modes, this pattern comes at the cost of side-lining women, who mostly dwell within the realms of metaphor and symbolism linked through nationhood. Whilst patriarchal ideals are upheld and reified during the narrator’s childhood through the strong presence of her father, the outbreak of war, which coincides with his sudden death from a heart attack, divests the narrative of paternal power, and reframes the narrative into a discordant dichotomy of male soldiers and female citizens.

Khedairi’s novel is essentially a bildungsroman that traces the formation of an unnamed female narrator. The novel commences with her childhood in rural Iraq and her experience of the disintegrating relationship between her Iraqi Father and British Mother whose cultural differences become a marital battlefield. The central portion of the novel depicts her move to Baghdad, where the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War thwarts her ambitions to become a ballet dancer, but where she meets and falls in love with an older Iraqi sculptor called Salim. However, once the narrator’s mother is diagnosed with breast cancer she is forced to choose between staying in Iraq with her lover or accompanying her mother to London. Before she is able to make the decision, her lover sets her free and she is doomed to the lonely and isolated experience of diaspora life whilst watching the disintegrating situation in Iraq after the 1991 US invasion, a process which is mirrored by the slow death of her mother from cancer. By the end of the novel the narrator has become a victim of an oppressive government, the war and her parents, as her life becomes a cauldron of thwarted ambitions and failed love affairs.

The novel never seeks to engage in pro- or anti-war rhetoric or commentary, nor does it explicitly condemn or condone the regime, its policies or society. Instead, this novel is a representation of personal struggle and civilian life in Iraq during the war. Whilst
Khedairi herself rejects the attachment of any political dimension\(^9\) to her work, the novel extends beyond showing the everyday ramifications of war on the individual. As such, it also 'highlights the political public discourse underway at the time. The novel describes the frightening military mobilization of Iraqi men forcefully implemented and the ensuing rhetoric of exaltation that took place in the media.'\(^8\) Despite its refusal to directly engage with politics, the novel articulates an intense cultural relationship between the state and the citizen. This cultural relationship can be traced within the novel through the tangible methods of direct cultural policy implemented by the government, and indicated by the narrator's participation in a number of state-sponsored initiatives to support the war effort and less-tangibly through her idealized performance of her gender role supporting the troops.

Once the narrator has moved to Baghdad, she, like the rest of the population, is sequestered into a concentrated programme of war mobilisation and troop support; these are often narrated through strict notions of masculinity and femininity. Whilst the young men are sent off to war, the women stay behind to work in factories, volunteer groups and to sew military uniforms. Despite a significant geographical distance between the narrator and the frontline, we see her observe that 'city-life became a khaki-coloured chameleon,'\(^9\) which pricked up its ears at the sound of the air-raid siren.\(^10\) The Iraqi narrative of war in this novel subscribes to the age-old adage that war has always been a man’s affair,\(^11\) a national narrative which women have been written out of and in which men have represented themselves in idealised roles of 'generals, leaders, warriors, ideologues, assigning the supporting roles to women.'\(^12\)

These supporting roles to which the narrator is assigned enable her to participate in volunteer classes, lectures on civil defence, political awareness and cultural education, all of which ensure that her participation in the war effort occurs in strictly female terms. These activities, which include her sewing uniforms for the troops on the frontline, depict a strictly partitioned world in which men are celebrated for going to war and women remain on the home-front supporting, upholding and cultivating the

\(^9\) Khedairi, interviewed by Chandler, (2010)
\(^8\) Hamdar, p. 139
\(^10\) The choice of chameleon for this image is important because it shares the same Arabic root as war (h-
\(^r-b\).
\(^11\) Khedairi, p. 102
\(^12\) Miriam Cooke, *War’s Other Voices: Women Writers in the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 6
\(^12\) Cooke, (1987), p. 2
meaning of militarised masculinity. The anthem that the narrator sings with the other girls in her sewing class is indicative of this:

“We are marching, marching to war...A lover entrusted with the defence of his beloved, we march to war.” We sing these anthems during our volunteer lessons as we sew cotton badges that are to be sent to the front line. One of the students croons softly: “I’m your mother, the homeland (she) says to me, and you are my son... a bridegroom and his kin will dance for him and your wedding day is my celebration...”

The dissemination of popular discourse by the women happens unconsciously. They are both actively and passively influenced by this gendered discourse, and the reader comes to realise that the military comes to constitute not just meanings of masculinity but also of the requirements of femininity to create it. This insidious relationship, which comes to constitute normalising narratives of masculinity and femininity in wartime Iraq, is inevitably focussed through a process of militarised nationalism. Women, whilst remaining on its fringes, are conscripted into supporting and honouring the role that men play. The anthem that they sing in their sewing class gestures towards a relationship between men and their homeland that has been augmented by the state to replace a relationship with “real” women, who are, in turn, subjugated to the greater feminized ideal of homeland. These ideals are just as unconsciously projected onto the “real-life” relationship that the narrator has with her Iraqi lover. Just as women are assigned to the metaphorical sphere and men are drafted into the frontlines in the anthem, the relationship between the narrator and Salim becomes equally spurious and amorphous.

Other characters who are members of her ballet class similarly adapt to wartime roles when the ballet school closes, roles that are particularly meaningful within gendered aspirations. Whilst the male ballet dancers are to be sent to the front line to ‘exchange ballet training for training with bullets,’ an almost assured destiny for youthful, and therefore powerful, masculinity in times of war, the destination of the female characters is just as pertinent. Their assignment to the feminine spheres of cooking, sewing, nursing and ethnic-nationalist heritage preservation indicates the far-reaching and at times surreptitious cultivation of nationalism through gender, culture and ethnic links. The narrator’s friend Sara is given a job at an Iraqi fashion house working on

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81 Khedairi, (1999), p. 91
restoring traditional folkloric costumes. Whilst this detail at first appears innocuous, it indicates a wider cultural trend that featured in 1980s Iraq. As Amatzia Baram has stated,

an extravagant contribution towards fostering Iraqi folklore, came from the Iraqi fashion house Dar al-Azya, founded under a law promulgated in 1970. Its goals were to preserve traditional attire from various parts and communities in Iraq and thus create horizontal fusion, but also ‘to protect and cultivate ancient Iraqi fashion,’ and ‘to raise the standard of design’ of Iraqi textiles’ with design inspired by the ancient Iraqi paintings,’ thus establishing a vertical connection with Iraq’s pre-Islamic past.

The women in the novel are not simply bound to female-appropriate job roles, but are also responsible for fostering a divergent yet homogenous Iraqi identity, called upon by the state through a sense of Iraqiness cultivated through mythology and folklore. Likewise, Saddam Hussein himself chose to manipulate his own position by interpolating various emotive ethnic responses by becoming a man for all people. Whilst, as has already been noted, he ‘played the card of Islamism while appearing in Basrah, or in the mountainous areas in cowboy uniforms,’ the fundamental cultural message was one of co-opting consent.

The tangible and strongly articulated messages of co-opted participation, indicated by the narrator’s role in programmes of state support, and her female class-mates participation in the preservation of a homogenous narrative of Iraqiness through folklore, indicates a gendered dimension to discourse privileged by the Ba’ath. As Abir Hamdar points out in her analysis of Khedairi’s writing:

During the war, the women continue to be identified by their connection to their male kin: introductions took the form of the “sister of a martyr,” “the mother of a martyr,” or “the fiancée of a soldier”. More indicatively, the adulation of the soldiers lends masculine control in the novel some stamina while the regime’s resolve to endorse marriage revivifies the patriarchal system as it sustains the traditional role of women as mothers.

Whilst masculinity remains the subject of the anthems sung in the narrator’s sewing classes, femininity is its object. Thus the songs indicate a female docility reduced to metaphorical existence, as the state ‘collapsed the nation and woman’s body and

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314 Khedairi, p. 118
315 Baram, p. 33
316 al-Musawi, p. 85
317 Hamdar, p. 139
insisted on the centrality of women as a trope of the nation and symbol of the fecundity of the land.\textsuperscript{318}

These discursive gender arrangements are not confined to the public sphere but are also invested in the private realm, an arena traditionally separate from the power of the state. The ban on contraceptives and the institutionalisation of marriage, (reflecting an actual policy of population replacement that was implemented in 1986) demonstrates the importance accorded to orientating sexuality and gender towards the procreative and the heteronormative. The novel discusses that fact that:

Pharmacies have been banned from selling the contraceptive pill in a concentrated campaign to increase the number of offspring to compensate for the losses in the battlefield. The television adverts are aimed at encouraging marriage and early conception. In a new trend called “mass weddings,” large halls are hired out, complete with all varieties of foods and sweets. Young couples are married there en masse.\textsuperscript{319}

This adherence to heteronormative gender expectations is reinforced by the narrator’s father, whose views on marriage and procreation converge with state policy. The reader of this novel is unaware as to whether or not he explicitly supports the state’s reasons for promoting marriage, but his adherence to an institution which is inherently patriarchal comes as no surprise given his own strong patriarchal values. As such, there is an expectation that one day the narrator will be a beautiful bride for a military man: ‘At least you contributed your excess weight to the war effort, you’ve become more beautiful than before...One day you’ll be a beautiful bride.’\textsuperscript{320}

The narrator’s relationship with her father is key in the novel. Her father emphasises her Iraqi identity above all else and his cultural and national loyalty is the central reason for the tortured disintegration of his marriage to his British wife. It is particularly when the narrator’s femininity is at stake that the couple clash the most.

My going to the School of Music and Ballet made you throw your temper in her face just before breakfast: “The girl will be corrupted.” She answers you from the kitchen: “But the schools in the rural regions are poor. I want my daughter to learn languages, dancing and socialising. I'm not asking much from you.” You mimic the way she speaks: “Dancing and

\textsuperscript{318} Aghacy, p. 6
\textsuperscript{319} Khedairi, p. 117
\textsuperscript{320} Khedairi, p. 95
socialising, no, not asking for much at all! But one day, she may pay a high price.” She comes to sit at the table. “I won’t let her go to a Bedouin school!” Your face flushes, perhaps you were choking on a piece of bread. “Don’t you realise, woman, that we’re in the East, and teaching her these things you call “arts” will damage her future.”

Whilst the father wishes for his daughter to observe her Iraqi heritage, he formulates his notion of his daughter’s Iraqiness above all through her gender. Whilst he wishes her to conform to traditional Iraqi/Islamic notions of femininity, the narrator’s mother opposes this. Her mother wishes for her to conform to Western notions of femininity, equally as powerful but framed through different expectations. She wishes her daughter to be rounded, educated and accomplished in traditional Western female pursuits, but these are at odds with traditional notions of Arab femininity. Both constructions of femininity are, in their own way, composite of oppressive gender expectations, but which also, interestingly, read as an East and West dichotomy. Instead of framing and constructing this dichotomy through a familiar Western feminist/Eastern misogynistic binary, the novel instead presents contrasting but equally powerful sources of emphasised femininity. It thus becomes a battleground between Eastern and Western constructs of femininity, but not one which explores the role of gender. Ultimately the narrator continues to pursue her career in the Ballet, despite the narrator’s father’s best efforts to put her off by telling her that she will ‘develop muscles, and [her] body will look like a man’s’, and his identifying an ‘impending masculinity’ in her Western feminine pursuits.

The importance of the narrator maintaining her femaleness, (though the tension in the novel is whether this is derived from an Iraqi or British source of emphasised femininity), is present all the way through the novel, and is closely linked to her father. Her relationship with the paternal is developed through the respect that she has for him, which is reflected in their shared passions and interests. When she is a teenager they spend hours naming paint colours for marketing purposes. Khedairi uses this activity as a literary device to set atmosphere and context for the coming action, and it is significant that when the narrator’s father tells her that war has broken out with Iran they are in the process of discussing names for a deep shade of red.

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Khedairi, p. 12
Khedairi, p. 63
Khedairi, p. 63
We embarked on a palette of the colour red. We discussed its shade and possibilities. I said something out of boredom: “It’s Blood Red.” After a while I suggested to you: “Red Thunder.” You nodded your head slowly: “Possible.” Then you suggested: “Mysterious Dawn is better.” “It’s more like lipstick, isn’t it?” “Yes, do you want to call it Red lipstick?” “Whatever you like…” I heard a long “Hmmmm.” Like you were bored…” “My daughter, you must know something very important.” “You’re both getting a divorce?” “No, a war with Iran has started.”

The colour association activity soon comes to a close with the outbreak of war. The father is not called upon to join up because of a problem with his heart, a condition from which he soon dies. This is a significant collision of events. As the war begins the narrative’s single patriarchal figure deteriorates and dies, almost as if the two events are unable to share representational space. The death of the narrator’s father is the most significant turning point for the representation of male characters in this novel. His exemption from the war, his sickness and his death are all indicative of a wider trend in Iraqi literary representations of the Iran-Iraq War. The archetypal patriarch, dead, and therefore absent, is replaced by the militarised fraternal man, Salim. Salim turns out to be a disappointing replacement, as the war becomes a constant and defining feature of his relationship with the narrator.

The death of the narrator’s father and his inadequate replacement by Salim indicates a shift in the position of masculinity in the novel. Whilst he is alive, there is a strong male presence which anchors patriarchal masculinity to a successful and authentic Iraqi identity. However, once the land of Iraq is shaken so too is the patriarchal masculinity to which it is bonded. As Hamdar notes, ‘masculine dominion in A Sky So Close is disconcerted by the war, it remains present through the paternal authority of the protagonist’s father and his influential status within the house, both of which are rarely vitiated.’

However, once the narrator’s father dies, an event which takes place soon after the outbreak of war, his paternal position is never filled. Instead, the narrator's lover, Salim, is locked in a fraternal relationship with his nation, military unit and his own masculine identity. Like every Iraqi and Iranian novel analysed within this study, the absent father is a constant feature and trope as older, patriarchal masculinity

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80 Khedairi, p. 89-90
81 Hamdar, p. 139
is silenced and fraternal masculinity creates women in the abstract as they struggle to adhere to metaphorical versions of their projected selves. As a result, the breakdown and disappearance of Iraqi patriarchal masculinity in Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!! explains the choice of title for Khedairi’s next novel, Ghayeb 326 (Absent) as traditionalised projections of Iraqi masculinity are erased from the social landscape of Iraq. Salim, the older soldier-turned-sculptor who takes the role of the narrator’s father, and replace him, is nowhere near as steadfast and enduring because his masculinity is not patriarchal.

Despite belonging to a liberal-intellectual group, Salim wants women to behave as women, as long as it does not interrupt masculine goals: ‘I love that streak of feminine wickedness...When it does no harm.’ 327 His lack of reliability can be traced to the importance he places on loyalty to his homeland, his unit and his military identity, a loyalty which is prized above and beyond his relationship with the narrator. When the narrator suggests that he ‘try chewing gum instead of smoking,’ he laughs at the ridiculous notion. He replies, ‘Can you imagine what I’d look like walking through the gates of the military base chewing gum? Just imagine it, ha!’ 328 This small moment exposes and clarifies Salim’s approach to his masculinity. Unlike the characters in Nasser’s collection of short stories, Salim is concerned with the physicality of his masculinity as its prevailing definition of manliness. It is through the performance of masculinity that Salim, out of all the male characters in this study, is able to draw closest to the abstract notion of Iraqi masculinity defined through war. Salim is virile, potent and a warrior. However, despite these qualities being the cornerstone of an Iraqi masculine ideal and the narrator’s attraction to his paternal power, Salim is not the powerful patriarch that she wishes for. When the narrator loses her virginity to Salim, she identifies her hymen blood through the colour naming activity she participated in with her father.

I’m with a man for the first time in my life. I’m frightened and cautious...The war is outside; we’re inside. We have no time for slow introductions. Why am I repeating his words? Where are mine? Did I lock the door to the flat behind me? We have just one hour; he wants to visit

327 Khedairi, p. 126
328 Khedairi, p. 147
his mother this evening and is taking the four o’clock train to the North...The hour is up. I place my fingers down there and say to myself, Sunset Red.”

Her virginity serves as a sexual commodity rather than a vessel of male honour. Whilst the heteronormative ideal centres on femininity, the notion of female sexuality as the vessel of male honour is replaced by the commodification of sexuality, subsumed and consumed as a catalyst for mobilization and nationhood. When the narrator loses her virginity to Salim, despite her strong feelings for him, the situation is more reminiscent of a soldier visiting a brothel than of an equal partnership between lovers. Their relationship is subordinated to a greater relationship between Salim and the homeland; towards the conclusion the novel suggests that relationships which take place and are augmented through state narratives privilege masculine relationships with the nation above relationships with “real” women. Of all the male characters in the Iraqi novels discussed in this and the preceding chapter, Salim is the most able to adhere to a version of Iraqi masculinity cultivated by the state. Even the narrator’s father, a strong patriarchal voice throughout the narrative, is eventually weakened through illness, sickens and then dies. In essence, the fate of the narrator’s father comes to mirror the state of the nation and structures of traditional masculinity thereby indicating their state of decline; his fate, therefore, is conflated with wider national allegories pertaining to Iraqi masculinity. This trend of failed patriarchal power can be found in all of the texts in this study. Indeed, it is trend in Iraqi literature that has been identified by other scholars. As Hamdar points out in her discussion of Khedairi’s second novel Ghayeb:

The failure of Abu Ghayeb and other male characters to realize the masculine ideals within their private spheres foregrounds their inability to meet the masculine demands at a national level; their inadequate performances as fathers, husbands, lovers and sons mirrors their performance towards the nation state. Their isolation within the space of the narrative is also a microcosm of their isolation from the public arena of the nation space which was no longer capable of encompassing and accommodating any man but Saddam and perhaps his remaining cohorts. It is true that Saddam’s name is never mentioned in the novel, yet his presence looms threateningly over the characters’ lives; his cruel deeds, his spies and his soldiers are omnipotent. Also, the fact that the building where the characters live is just a

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Khedairi, p. 137
walking distance from the site of an impressive statue of Saddam is further affirmation of his imperious presence, albeit representatively.330

The only method of survival, adherence to state definitions of hegemonic masculinity in *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!!*, comes at the expense of male-female relationships. The relationship between the narrator and Salim is not only dominated by war, but is defined by it. Militarized motifs and expectations characterize their relationship. Though Salim is many years older than the narrator, and supposedly a supporter of the monarchy and thus, by inference, anti-regime331 his military identity comes to dominate his world-view. Salim, draws on his new profession in his artwork. The subjects of Salim’s sculptures display this strongly militarised influence:

The first work is a life-size sculpture of a new baby boy. His umbilical cord extends from his abdomen to a placenta in the shape of a combat helmet. The second sculpture is of a woman breast feeding her baby but instead of breasts a pair of khaki helmets jutted out...The reports the military analysts circulate among the artworks: “Unending waves of men flowed down onto the battlefield toward us. Our forces repelled the attack, preventing the enemy from achieving his dreams of arriving at the borders.”332

The gruesome figures which form the subject of Salim’s art allow the reader to register the extent to which war, and more importantly the national rhetoric of war, has permeated the artist’s psychology. At the same time, Salim’s success in his militarised role ultimately leads to the deterioration of his emotional wellbeing. Salim begins to change; one night during his second period of leave the narrator wakes to hear banging coming from Salim’s studio. When she enters she sees that ‘half his statues had been shattered by the blows of his hammer in the early hours that night. He was sitting in the far corner gazing at the wreckage, smoking greedily and crying.’333 The destruction of the statues ultimately mirrors the destruction of Salim’s psychology by the war; it has saturated and appropriated his identity. Equally, when the war ends, the relationship between Salim and the narrator ends with it, suggesting that the relationship between the narrator and Salim is not only dominated by the war, but contingent upon it. As Miriam Cooke has observed, ‘in Iraqi literature of the last years of the Iran-Iraq War, love thrives only when gender specific spaces are mandated by the exigencies of

330 Hamdar, p. 150-151
331 Khedairi, p. 118
332 Khedairi, p. 120-121
333 Khedairi, p. 176
war...when these men come home alive, notions of heroism give way to the reality of tension.\textsuperscript{334} The war-time relationship can only exist during war, understood through absence in their respective, gendered spaces: Salim at the front and the narrator at home. The war permeates every aspect of the narrator’s quotidian life, even her experience at ballet school is a replication of war-time psychology.

Complete perfection means death. Ballet strives for perfection, so you have to push yourselves in your training to the point of death, without surrendering to it until the end of the performance. We didn’t know of which performance she was talking. It was as though we were all awaiting her secret instructions to complete a military mission from which we might or might not return.\textsuperscript{335}

Even ballet becomes militarised in war as the dance comes to reflect the aggressive, violent and driven nature of war and death. The battlefield is where the war is acted out, but it is at ‘home’ that the war is reproduced and constructed through daily-performance. The imitation of war becomes more real than the war itself as the linear narrative of the text is constantly interrupted by military communiques about the war:

We’ve started to get used to the images of military manoeuvres, the thunder, the thunder of shelling, unexpected military communiqués, and the expected ones starting, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,” and ended with “may the wicked be shamed.” We were bombarded with patriotic songs, the National Anthem, verses from the Koran, and the slogan that the martyrs were the most generous of all.\textsuperscript{336}

The reader begins to realise that as the quotidian and the domestic sphere is slowly impinged upon by the outside world, the narrator seems to lose her power altogether. Despite the apparently apolitical position that this novel adopts, the novel articulates an intense cultural relationship between state and society embedded in idealised masculine and feminine roles. \textit{Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!} replicates some common elements of Iran-Iraq War fiction. Primarily, the novel documents the disintegration of the Iraqi patriarch, replacing him with a fraternal soldier who is not so much interested in dominating a private, domestic sphere but instead is consumed by a public space demarcated by notions of nation and borders.

\textsuperscript{334} Cooke,(1995), p. 199
\textsuperscript{335} Khedairi, p. 105
\textsuperscript{336} Khedairi, p. 102
The privilege that war brings to men is dubious at best. The psychological effect of the war on Salim is acknowledged as a tragic sociological phenomenon. Though Iraqi media and propaganda painted a picture of masculinity through soldiering as proud, brave and defiant, the grim reality was very different for both Iranian and Iraqi soldiers: they became cannon fodder for their regimes' political objectives. The representation of men within gendered propaganda exalted the hyper-masculinity of the warrior, cutting and creating the perfect soldier into the image of Saddam. *Kam Badat al-Sama’ Qariba!!* describes the mobilisation and rhetoric designed to interpolate Iraqi men, but it also chooses to portray a nuanced reality. Arguably it is this exploration of Iraqi masculinity which forms the best narrative of resistance, and as Abir Hamdar points out:

> While ordinary Iraqi men were pushed outside the public arena of the nation state by Saddam’s overwhelming presence and while they could not meet the masculine and militarized standards he wished to inscribe and sustain...these ailments perhaps cut off Saddam and his entourage from the heart of the nation.  

Whilst Nasser examines the broader themes of the economic and moral disempowerment of masculinity through authoritarianism and poverty, Khedairi chooses to depict a civil society which privileges a form of masculinity unattainable to the ordinary citizen. In essence, Khedairi’s novel is a tale of failed hegemony but successful dominance, an important distinction if one is to discuss the relationship between gender, power and hegemony. This theme is continued in the next chapter, which examines how later novels by Sinan Antoon and Muhsin al-Ramli attempt to redraw the lines between dominance and hegemony. These two novels view the state through the lens of deviance, as the Ba’ath is more openly dealt with, thus framing the dominance versus hegemony debate through body-conscious violence such as male rape, homosexuality and feminine deviance, violence which comes to represent modes of male crisis and national decline.

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Hamdar, p. 152

4.1: OVERVIEW

The end of the war between Iraq and Iran presented a shift in narrative about the war by both Iranian and Iraqi writers, as many sought to re-examine the nature of the conflict. Inevitably, this has been more pronounced in Iran because it has not been subjected to a series of brutal conflicts and declining economic conditions under a totalitarian police state which has been responsible for fragmenting and disrupting its literary production in the same way Iraq has. By contrast, post-war Iranian novels have been through a more prolonged period and process of self-examination than their Iraqi counter-parts, but this has led to polarising attitudes regarding the raison d’être of Iran-Iraq War literature.

Veterans of the war were gradually beginning to look back and reassess the conflict and their own role and place in society. With the experiences of thousands of young people, many of whom were trying to cope with their disabilities, their time as prisoners of war, and other consequences of the war, a new discourse began among veterans that divided them into two camps.\(^{(1)}\)

The first of these two camps tended to maintain that the war was a sacred defence of the nation, defined in strictly religious and nationalist terms, a position which chimed in with government narratives and ideology. The second group is predominantly composed of those who wish to re-examine the war, come to terms with it in a manner that steers its narratives away from those propagated by the government. For the newly formed Islamic Republic, the war was the most important catalyst for consolidating its power: the conflict neutralised competition and generated cohesive nationalist narratives based in religion. Though writing and publishing was and remains a difficult process in Iran, the diversity of literature about the war in both fiction and non-fiction has been as a result of the war’s importance as a catalyst for the societal consolidation of the post-revolutionary Islamic regime. Whilst official sponsorship of literature and prolific pro-war literary production has continued, particularly from the government institution Sazman-i Tablighat-i Islami (or as previously mentioned Huzah Hunari), other narratives, which have examined the war more critically and sensitively, have

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\(^{(1)}\) M. R. Ghanoonparvar, ‘Introduction,’ in Davud Ghaffarzadegan, *Fortune Told in Blood*, (The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 2008), ix-xv, (p. xv)
found their way into public discourse. Indeed, the importance of the war in shaping contemporary Iranian society has led many novels, which would not ordinarily be considered war novels by academics of Persian literature, to be subjected to classic taxonomical problems of genre-forming in Persian literature. War narratives are no longer the exclusive domain of the soldier in Iran because the effects of war have echoed and rippled throughout society. For example, *Dalî Fûlad* (Heart of Steel) by Moniru Ravanipur, usually classed as a novel belonging to post-revolutionary feminist literature,\(^{339}\) has instead been re-classified as a war novel\(^{340}\) by the *Bibliography of the Sacred Defense*. This is because the bibliography employs more expansive and inclusive categories of fiction in contrast with more prescriptive academic understandings of genre-forming in Persian literature.

This aside, it is not solely the political capital of the war that has allowed Iranian writers to explore their recent history, but - on an inter-state level at least - the sustained peace. The same cannot be said of Iraq. Almost immediately following the cessation of hostilities with Iran, the irredentist aims of Saddam Hussein resulted in the annexing of Kuwait and eventually the 1991 US invasion. Unsurprisingly, most of the fiction about the Iran-Iraq War (that was not directly sponsored by the government and is more than a series of didactic claims) was produced outside of Iraq. In exile writers were able to more freely express themselves, emancipated as they were from constant anxiety about Saddam Hussein’s punitive policies and his regime’s antagonistic relationship with the international community. Accordingly, it does not come as a surprise that much of the focus of Iraqi literature in the post-war period was mainly defined by and concerned with contemporaneous interests and circumstances rather than a re-examination of Iraqi experiences of the first Persian Gulf War.

As such it is this reflective authorial experience which could explain the shift in the relationship between masculinities and patriarchy in these texts. Just as in the previous chapter, the novels in these later periods also employ representations of masculinities to construct political critique, and transform masculinities into national allegories. However, instead of employing the decay of patriarchy as a marker for national decline, patriarchy is transformed into a site of deep contestation in these novels as successful patriarchal prototypes comes to imbibe the deterioration of the nation. This

\(^{339}\) Talattof, p. 157

\(^{340}\) Burovand, p. 431
chapter is a close textual analyses of Ahmad Dehqan’s *Safar bah Garay 270 Darajah* (Journey Heading 270 Degrees), Davud Ghaffarzadegan’s *Fāl-i Khun* (Fortune Told in Blood), Muhsin al-Ramli’s *al-Fātīt al-Muḥāṭhar* (Scattered Crumbs) and Sinan Antoon’s *I’jaam* and examines the patriarchal figures in all of these novels as an obstacle to the success of their fraternal male protagonists. Whilst al-Ramli and Dehqan choose to present and expose their critiques of the state through weakened and declining patriarchal figures who the protagonists must ultimately escape, Antoon and Ghaffarzadegan bypass the familial, domestic patriarch and employ patriarchy in a broader national sense. By casting a corrupting patriarchal dictator, or as in the case of Dehqan’s novel, through the emasculating hierarchical structures in the military both novels cast the state and traditional state structures as the prototypically oppressive patriarchal figure. It is important to remember that even those familial patriarchs are utilised in broader critiques of the state, as the youthful male protagonists set out to evade the spheres of power belonging to their fathers, dictators and a traditional military structures in order to gesture to the “ideal” nation which patriarchal power structures impede.

**POST-WAR IRAQI FICTION**

Iraqi writers have continued (though to a much lesser extent than their Iranian counterparts) to write about the Iran-Iraq War, and some of the most incisive works have inevitably come from outside Iraq; away from the stifling atmosphere of a police state which actively and methodically persecuted writers. For many of these writers in exile, their final experience of their homeland was Iraq at the end of the war with Iran and before the US invasion of 1991. Whilst the war has continued to underpin a major part of Iranian public consciousness, Iraqi novels about the Iran-Iraq War have tended to be more polarised: they either narrate the experience of war itself on the frontline, or they use the war as a setting in which to be openly, and caustically, critical of Saddam Hussein’s regime. This is particularly true of the Iraqi novels that form the major focus of this chapter.

The Iraqi novels in this chapter, by Muhsin al-Ramli and Sinan Antoon, criticise a regime which instigated a war in which hundreds of thousands of people died senselessly. Both writers left Iraq immediately following the end of the war, and their
novels narrate a dystopic world in which their characters live under a terrifying regime of tyranny. The main protagonists’ stories do not simply take place in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq during the first Gulf war, but are shaped and moulded by the presence of an omnipotent figure known simply as the leader (al-Qa’id). Saddam Hussein’s unnamed presence is then asserted by Ba’ath party neophytes who even look like him. In this sense, although on the one hand a unified Iraqi identity is emphasised, on the other it is in equal measure undermined by the - mainly Sunni and Tikriti - elite’s treatment of the general heterogeneous population. This treatment of the population and the characters in the novels underscores the basic premise of both Iraqi texts. In Sinan Antoon’s novel *I’jaam* for example the uncivilised treatment of the state towards the general population is described by the narrator when he attends a football match.

The emergency forces were in full military dress with machine guns, and some with police dogs as well. Some of them organised the spectators into queues, whilst others took tickets and dropped them in a barrel as others searched people. Most of them were young and did not look more than twenty. Most of them were from the areas surrounding Tikrit, judging from their accents…and their scowling faces, through that might be a reflection of their harsh training.\(^\text{341}\)

The way in which representatives of officialdom treat the population, and impose their will upon them, exposes a state which is run for the preservation of a dictator who seeks to homogenise Iraq in his own image. *I’jaam* by Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon presents a narrative that is both deeply complex and yet terrifyingly simple in its premise. The novel documents the fragmented and deteriorating narrative of a prisoner, whose only crime is passive resistance to an all-encompassing cult of personality. The novel opposes yet steadfastly interacts with the constructs of a police state, whose tentacles wind their way into every aspect of every one of its citizens’ lives. The novel, in many ways, is frightening because it is the “real-life version” of George Orwell’s novel *1984*. Both Orwell’s imaginary dystopia and Antoon’s real dystopia depict a world in which life is dominated by perpetual war, pervasive government surveillance, historical revisionism and in which the population is subordinated to a totalitarian cult of personality. In both novels the party leader is deified by the public but secretly hated by the respective leading protagonist, both of whom are eventually

\(^{341}\) Antoon, p. 123
found out and imprisoned. However, unlike in Orwell's novel, Antoon's protagonist is able to resist imprisonment and torture by the state through the act of writing.

4.2: Sinan Antoon: *I'jaam*

Written many years after the war, and published in Beirut in 2003, *I'jaam* is subject to and wary of the cultural and political climate of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Reflecting its narrative—where time and space are an important part of its structure—the time and space of the novel’s production and publication is also an integral part of what the text is able to say. The novel is presented as the official version of a hand-written and undotted manuscript which has been recovered from a filing cabinet in the Ministry of the Interior. Preceding the main body of the text is an official memo from the public security directorate which states that the novel needs to be reworked into a medium in which it can be understood i.e. the diacritics need to be reinserted into the text.

```arabic
وزارة الداخلية
مديرية الأمن العامة
مديرية أمن بغداد
372684 
م/ سري وعاجل

إلى من يهمه الأمر

تم العثور على المخطوطة المرفقة أدناه أثناء إجراء الجرود الشامل لكافة الملفات
استعدادًا للاستعداد في المجمع الجديد. وبعد الإطلاع عليها اتضح أنها كتبت
بدون نقاط. الرجاء تكليف أحد الرفاق بقراءتها وتنقيطها مع طبعها على
الآلة الطابعة، وترؤيدنا بنسختين منها بمعد إكمال نهاية الشهر الحالي.
مع الشكر سلفاء التوقيع

الإعلان عليه بتاريخ 24 آب 1989. الرجاء تكليف الأخ طلال بالمهمة.
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The significance of the undotted manuscript is particularly pertinent for a manuscript written in Arabic script. Without the dots to distinguish between letters, the three letter Arabic root system allows for a plethora of meanings to be derived from an undotted text thus obfuscating the direct meaning of any given word. For example, without dots the simple root k-t-b, from which the verb to write is derived, can be read in a number of ways, ranging from ‘to suppress’ to ‘humming’; ‘callous’ to ‘deployment of squadrons’.

This not only allows the author of the manuscript more freedom to write -since discovery is rendered more difficult since the text cannot be simply be read-but it also means the text needs to be interpreted and therefore mediated. The manner of the text’s creation and its transformation into a readable text by the state means that the state unwittingly becomes the text’s interpreter and mediator. This creates a distinct problem for the reader, as they, like the protagonist, become subject to the state’s omnipotent presence which presides over the text. In essence, there are two narrators of this story. Firstly there is Furat, the original and primary narrator whose story lies at the centre of the narrative; however, the reader is forced to consider and take note of the second, enigmatic and hidden narrator, Talal Ahmad, an employee of the Ministry of the Interior, who is responsible for translating the text. Despite the assertion by Talal Ahmad that he has left the text in its original format, his attitude to the text has an important bearing on its reception. The reader is subject to Talal Ahmad’s linguistic choices and interpretations, which are influenced by the feelings of repulsion that he claims the text gives rise to:

I have hesitated much over the manner with which to deal with the filth and obscenities that appear in the text. However, I have endeavoured to leave the text in its original format despite the presence of abhorrent expressions and phrases which have been written to mock and revile the sayings of Our Father Leader (may God preserve him), the achievements of the party, the revolution, our struggle and our just battle against the tyrannical enemy.

Whether this repulsion is a genuine feeling or pure affectation can never be established because of the nature of the society in which Talal Ahmad lives. Either way it is through Talal Ahmad that the text is mediated since he is charged with deciphering and reinserting the dots, as well as translating local Arabic and Chaldean dialects for the reader. However his attitude and approach to the text is an important component of how the reader understands the novel, and leaves the reader with a

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*Antoon, p. 106*

*Antoon, p. 135*
sense of wariness of being manipulated thus forcing the reader to interact with the text on multiple levels. Whilst the narrator freely moves between languages, dialects and random moments in time and space, the narrative is constrained, coerced and ordered through its official rendering by Talal Ahmad. The theme and aim of the story is thus purveyed not just through its narrative but also through its very construction, as its linguistic and narrative freedom is constrained and ordered by a coercive government.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that the intention of this novel is to oppose the status-quo of Iraqi society and, more importantly, tyranny in all its forms. As such, it is no surprise that Antoon’s novel follows in the footsteps of other Iraqi literature by placing its narrative within prison space. Because literature has often been a site of resistance in both classical and contemporary Iraqi prose and poetry, the narratives of many Iraqi texts has been mediated through prison space. The popularity of prison space as a setting for Iraqi fiction speaks volumes about the relationship that many writers, both classical and contemporary, have had with the state. The pervasiveness of the prison as a location in the Arabic novel, and in the Iraqi novel in particular, demonstrates the importance that the state has placed on literature and its ability to influence discourse. Whilst the prison literature of Egyptian writers has been rigorously and consistently documented, examples of other Arabic prison literature can be found across the Arab World, particularly within a post-colonial context. This writing indicates that the relationship between writers and the state has long been fraught with difficulty and brutality: many writers share the experience of incarceration by the state. This has generated a prison literature that has developed its own style and themes, emphasising the freedom of the mind to create and resist when the body is in chains. As Elisabetta Benigni has pointed out:

The structure of the prison is like a parallel universe with its own rules and rhythms which causes the prisoners to modify their relationship with the space they live in, with time, with their own bodies and also with their thoughts and memories.

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346 Benigni, p.13
In addition to this, within the works examined in this study, there is an important sense of revelation, as the full extent of state brutality is revealed through its treatment of detainees behind closed doors. This tell-all look at one of the central institutions of the state, (there is no need to reiterate Foucauldian logic in order to assert this), reveals the machinations of a state committed to enslaving its citizens’ bodies.

*Ijaami’s* resistance to the state is reflected in its rejection of linear narrative. The non-linearity of the novel’s structure, which draws on a writing style that is associated with prison literature, fragments the narrative in order to reflect a prisoner who has been tormented and tortured by the Iraqi police state. This rejection of linear narrative challenges both neat explanations and a notion that history can even be understood in a straight-forward cause and effect framework. For Antoon’s protagonist history cannot be trusted, particularly when it is in the hands of an officialdom which revels in historical revisionism. This defiance, which is threaded through the novel’s structure and narrative, resists the history of Iraq used and reworked by Hussein into a series of simplified myths which ‘depoliticized the past, emptied it of socio-economic dynamics, and drew on it as profusely available to achieve rebirth in a triumphal present.’ As such, the author himself points out:

The novel in the broadest meaning of the word is any narrative in which the individual takes refuge in order to rationalise existence, domesticate randomness, and mould it into a narrative account. And the novel in this sense is a support for ideologies, religions and myths which we fall prey to, unconsciously to understand the world or delude ourselves that we understand it.

He goes on to define this hegemony as something inherent to the way human beings make sense of the world around them: ‘non-linearity is a political and philosophical choice. It is an attempt to disrupt what I take to be a hegemonic discourse.’ Antoon counters state-conceived hegemony and refutes the state’s monopoly on nationalist story-telling by resisting linear narratives, wresting them from the state and through alternative structures and language, examining the nature of narrative itself and

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347 Al-Musawi, p. 73
suggesting methodologies of dissent. Furat, the novel’s protagonist, is compellingly rebellious, his resistance predicated on absence, silence and conscientious non-participation. These actions are formulated as powerful acts of dissent. This silence and non-participation are conveyed as being equivalent to and as meaningful as open rebellion. In this case, resistance is non-confrontational, non-aggressive, creative and intellectual, none of which was tolerated in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Even so, this resistance to hegemony imbibes and seeks to create and promote particular alternatives to state hegemony, which inevitably leads to a particular understanding of gender relations. Contrary to the idealisation of masculinity traditionally associated with war, both of these novels seek to contest state power through a reinterpretation of masculine ideals. The ideals of masculinity which are promoted in both al-Fatit al-Muba’thar and I’jaam, offer an alternative to the bellicose, hyper-masculinity which was adopted by a tyrannical state. This alternative masculinity, according to Laleh Khalili’s observations, contrasts state-supported masculinity and is promoted as normative within liberal, pluralist, neo-liberal model of modern democratic governance. The progression from a patriarchal dictatorship to a modern nation-state is associated with new approaches to and carefully demarcated boundaries of fraternal masculinity. Even when alternative masculinity and its subsequent associations with specific political and state structures fail, it emphasises the non-normative dystopia of Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

Whilst the Iraqi state presented an ideal of masculinity in conventional war-like terms, in both Antoon and al-Ramli’s novels an alternative masculine identity is inscribed, one which contests that fermented by the state through its various institutions and cultural forays. As such, Antoon’s novel and his representation of the state, create two adverse and highly contrasting images of masculinity, each of which is represented by a very distinct group. The first group consists of men that represent a patriarchal and oppressive state: soldiers, torturers, informers or guards - all of whom act on behalf of a state. They are without character, merely agents to allow the state to appear and be everywhere. They even look like the state as it is embodied by Saddam Hussein as their distinctively Tikriti physical appearance blurs and consumes their individuality. The alternative to this masculinity is represented by the protagonist and hero of the

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novel, Furat, who represents a subaltern, intellectual and creative masculinity. He is a poet frustrated by the constraints of state censorship and whose ability to publish is directly affected by the constrained cultural environment surrounding him. He refuses to participate in state directed activities and employs a method of passive resistance through silence and non-participation: ‘I would stand with my hands in my pockets. I had stopped clapping since my days at secondary school as a sort of silent protest.’ Furat is independent, intellectual and is demonstrably heterosexual without being sexually aggressive. The only other male who features in this novel within the confines of this male representation is Falah, Furat’s friend. He, however, is merely a roughly drawn shadow of Furat himself. We know little about Falah except that, like Furat he has a medical condition which prevents him from being drafted into the Iraqi army and sent to the frontline. Similarly he is also creatively frustrated by the atmosphere in Hussein’s Iraq, a sentiment that features in other novels examining life in Iraq during the war. It is interesting to note that Falah, like Qasim in al-Fatit al-Muba’thar, is also unable to paint a portrait of the leader, which inevitably means he is unable to display his work in the public arena. Furat and Falah in I’jaam, like Qasim in al-Fatit al-Muba’thar, represent a subaltern but promoted group of masculinity which is predicated on a lack of physicality, disability, creativity, and intelligence. They represent a normative but alternative masculinity which serves to emphasise the abnormality of a bellicose hyper-masculinity associated with the state. Just as the non-linearity of the novel seeks to breakdown the experience of state dominance, the narrator breaks free from his prison walls through the power of the written word as he frames his rejection of the state through an intellectual and non-aggressive masculinity grounded in heterosexuality.

4.3: MUHSIN AL-RAMLI: AL-FATIT AL-MUBA’THAR (SCATTERED CRUMBS)

Published in Cairo in 2000, by Markaz al-Hadara al-Arabiyya, the novel al-Fatit al-Muba’thar by Muhsin al-Ramli relates the story of a peasant family in a rural Iraqi village during the Iran-Iraq War. al-Fatit al-Muba’thar is narrated by an unnamed
Iraqi expatriate who, like the author himself, is currently living in Spain. He professes to have left Iraq to look for his lost cousin Mahmud, who fled his country for Madrid. The focus of the novel, however, is not the search for his cousin but the story of members of Mahmud’s immediate family during the Iran-Iraq War. Like Ḩa’am, its readings of masculinity become an important national allegory and political critique. Similar models of male protagonists and antagonists emerge around emphasised understandings of masculinity. The state remains associated with an abnormal hyper-masculinity which is juxtaposed against fraternal masculinity, represented by the creativity and intelligence of the protagonist Qasim. Though the patriarchal state is criticised and shown to ultimately triumph over fraternal masculinity, the promotion of new masculine archetypes permits a strong gender-based critique to emerge. In essence the triumph of the state is perceived patriarchally but is also associated with deviant male sexuality, demonstrating to the reader the immoral nature of the Ba’ath regime and how it is possible for it to undermine ideal masculinities.

At the core of the story is the relationship between the protagonist Qasim and his father Ijayel, whose jingoist, nationalist sentiments, which support the ruling regime, fail to distinguish between a corrupt state and the land/nation of Iraq. At first it appears that the state triumphs over alternative intellectual masculinity drawing on patriarchal notions of power, however, when Ijayel, Qasim’s father, who unswervingly supports the state, is thrown into a state of crisis and decline and renounces his patriarchal power when he becomes aware of the state’s corrupt nature, the state is triumphant over all Iraqi men.

The tragedy is that as the narrative unfolds, the war which Ijayel so blindly and fervently supports tears his family apart. Qasim is eventually executed for desertion, because he refuses to fight a war in which he does not believe, an act which leads to the eventual scattering of the family members. The reader experiences a denouement which relates wretched endings and unfair rewards for the novel’s characters; this is a tragic tale of imposed war and dictatorship upon a small community. Lynne Rogers’ summation in her review of *Scattered Crumbs* is that:

This brief novel begins as a satire of life in an Iraqi village under an anonymous yet easily-recognized dictator and offers a poignant self-examination of impotency and exile. Unlike
many novels that deal with the despair of exile, “Scattered Crumbs” never loses sight of the horrific conditions in a lost homeland.”

Thematically reminiscent of Latin American novels with a dictator as their central theme, both these Iraqi novels present a dictator who is the ‘supreme, omnipotent figure of authority who controls everything through the use of words and who appears everywhere in overt and covert ways.’ The dictator in al-Fatit al-Muba’thar punishes civility, normality and patriotism, whilst rewarding deviance and greed. He sends honourable men to their death in the name of serving their country, as in the case of the one of the brothers, Abdul-Wahid who dies serving on the frontline; and those who adhere to their principles, such as Qasim, who would rather die than betray his own integrity. Meanwhile, Saadi, who is shown to have no principles, morals or ethics, is promoted to positions high-up in the regime. In essence, this novel presents an upside-down world in which villain triumphs and hero dies.

The non-normative and deviant representations of state-promoted masculinity in al-Fatit al-Muba’thar, demonstrate an important aspect of how gender regimes are formulated in both novels to act as a form of dissent. In this fiction deviant desires and non-normative sexualities operate as moral allegories to illustrate wider social and political problems. The typology of masculinity represented by Qasim and Furat, for instance, points to a mode of middle-class masculinity found in modern democratic nation-states. The novel juxtaposes this against a bellicose, patriarchal masculinity promoted by the state. This typology of masculinity, and therefore patriarchal masculinities, are then associated with dictatorship, perpetrators of oppression and subjugation in both of these novels, and one whose characteristics are far more easily mobilised to protect the state during wartime. Though both Antoon and al-Ramli openly oppose political and social hegemony, as is indicated by their rejection of this second formulation of masculinity, this is not always achieved in terms of the alternative sexualities that they employ and represent as markers for national disaster.

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357 Agosin, p.329
This emphasis on a conflated relationship between dominance and deviance, two terms which in nearly any other context are contradictory, highlights a dominant, but non-normative state. One of the many shared features of both *Ijaam* and *al-Fatît al-Muba\'thar* is that the power of the state and the threat of male rape become coterminous. The state’s use of male rape within its institutions, more specifically the prison, is used to denote and carefully demarcate normative and non-normative behaviours, which are then referenced back to the state. In this context, *Ijaam* and *Scattered Crumbs* both utilise specific representations of sexuality in order to make broader political points. This comes as no surprise, as Massad has observed, when in post-1980s Arabic literature, sexualities, particularly deviant sexualities, have been seized upon and transformed into apologies of wider social and political consequences of bad governance.

Sexual desires and acts—especially of non-normative variety, which until the late 1960s, for the most part, and with notable exceptions, added depth and detail to the narrative—have been transformed into the quintessential social allegory to represent the state of society in the 1990s and beyond.  

Both Saadi in *al-Fatît al-Muba\'thar* and Abu Khalid, the prison guard in *Ijaam*, are malignant faces of a regime which uses and condones male rape. This method of control enacted by the state corrupts its heteronormative citizens by engaging in homosexual behaviour in contravention to modern understandings of the “natural.” Both Saadi and Abu Khalid, agents of the state, use the penis and the anus as the primary point of control when it comes to imposing and gaining power over other men. The brutal rape of Furat in prison by Abu Khalid on several occasions is both deeply shocking and graphic. Each occurrence is partnered with an erotic heterosexual encounter in the narrative in order to reaffirm what might be termed ‘the heterosexuality of resistance’. For example, the protagonist’s first recollection of his brutal and sadistic rape by Abu Khalid is immediately followed by the recollection of an incident in which he has a sexual encounter with a girl during a pro-government protest in which they have been forced to participate. The orgasm that he achieves with this unknown girl is cited through a lens of resistance, as his own climax is masked by the crowds chanting positive affirmations for their leader, through a process

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358 Massad, p. 270
of enforced indoctrination. This erotic encounter between Furat and the unknown girl serves a specific function. It frames resistance as a heterosexual act, as opposed to the homosexual acts committed by the state. The importance of placing resistance within a framework of heterosexuality labels subaltern masculinity as normative whilst the hegemony of the state embodies deviance. As Antoon argues in an interview with Adnan Hussein Ahmad:

I focussed on rape in particular because as an act it is one of the harshest phenomena of violence and without exception the most loathsome. It confiscates the other person’s right of refusal and penetrates the borders of the mind and the body leaving the victim psychologically scarred for the rest of their life….Rape was, as we know, a favoured tool by the regime against opponents and their families. Those who executed this were just a small model of a big executioner.

The state as a rapist signifies a real threat of homosexual danger in state-controlled spaces, as rape and homosexuality become conflated terms when associated with a brutal state. In al-Fatīṭ al-Mubāṭhar Qasim’s experience of prison reveals a world controlled by the state where he is only spared torture and death because his brother, Saadi, has sexual relations with the prison warden.

The guards were the first to get drawn or tattooed by Qasim and the first to bed Saadi. When the warden heard about this, he ordered Qasim to draw a picture of the Leader, and when he could not, he was placed in solitary. The warden ordered Saadi to stop keeping prisoners up at night, and when he could not, he was isolated as well. But Saadi took off his underwear and climbed up on the shit canister in his prison cell, placing his behind in the little window that separated him from the rest of the prisoners in his hall so that they could climb up in turn and reach him from there. When the warden learned of this, he became extremely angry and moved Saadi to a private chamber adjoining his office where he was provided with every luxury!!

Both these novels ask their readers to challenge and question the value system that is being propagated by the regime, and do so using allegories of sexual violation and homosexual danger to illustrate their arguments. Likewise, both novels implicate their main male characters in the very value system that they seek to criticise, by asserting that ideal masculinity is predicated on naturalised heterosexuality. Thus though the men in these novels seek to free themselves from a dominant regime that oppresses

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339 Antoon, p. 44
340 Antoon, interviewed by Ahmad
361 al-Ramli, p. 60-61
them, their alternative to the regime is to reassert neo-liberal democratic nationalist models of normative and thus hegemonic male relations. In this sense, it aids in an understanding as to why representations of women and subaltern masculinities, particularly those related to homosexual identities are not radically rewritten when patriarchy ceases to be celebrated and valorised. Instead these traditionally subordinated categories are simply freer to legitimise normative male hegemony except in these contexts they are fraternal rather than patriarchal. As such, male honour in both the novels is closely linked with active sexuality associated with heterosexual masculinity (reverting back to a dichotomy in which the person who penetrates is male and those who are penetrated are feminised and by implication despised). For example, when Furat and Areej in *I'jaam* discuss the politics of using sexual currency to save their souls, Furat recognises the intellectual implications of gender roles within sexual bargaining but is unable to dismiss them. Unwilling to feminise himself by asserting that he will only take on the role of the active sexual partner, he has no problem with Areej assuming this role. This is not an unconscious decision since the protagonist is fully aware that his assertions are grounded in social conventions that enforce heteronormativity and heterosexuality.

“Won’t the morality committee summon us once they find out about the crime we have perpetrated, sleeping together without social and religious authorization?”

“I am sure they will, but I am also sure that we can find a bureaucrat to bribe.”

“Maybe you can sleep with one of the angels so that he will wipe the records clean and stamp our souls ‘heaven’.”

“And if the angel prefers boys will you sleep with him?”

I answered laughing.

“I’ll have to think about that!”

“What’s there to think about? Where is your feminism and your radicalism? I am permitted to use my body for your salvation but not your body for mine?

“My darling, liberation from social conventions takes time. I am prepared to fuck him if he wants me to but I am not willing to let him fuck me.”

This understanding and intellectualisation of gender roles reinforces the humiliation of Furat in prison as he is repeatedly raped, and forcibly placed in a passive sexual role. Just as Furat resists any formulation of himself as a passive male partner, it is revealed that the state in many ways had been buggering him all along, linking libidinal

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"Antoon, p, 86-87"
economy with political economy. The state, in its role as rapist, violates the heteronormative ideal that has been established as a core value of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore the state throws out any understanding or aspiration to be hegemonic and instead subscribes to an understanding of dominance, which is clearly differentiated by Connell in his writings on hegemonic masculinity. As has been previously mentioned in Chapter 2, Connell has noted that:

> It is difficult to see how the concept of hegemony would be relevant if the only characteristics of the dominant group were violence, aggression, and self-centeredness. Such characteristics may mean domination but hardly would constitute hegemony—an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups.

The state in both the Iraqi novels discussed here does not seek legitimacy from those it oppresses. Instead it aspires to dominance rather than the normative and legitimised aspirations of hegemony. This in essence is the message conveyed by both authors in their portrayal of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. The acceptance of sexual violation and the destruction of heteronormativity by the state is in contravention with the text’s notion of modern masculinity as a product of heteronormativity. This homosexual danger posed by the state is also present in *al-Fatīḥ al-Mubaṭhar*; as Saadi’s deviant sexuality serves as an important indication of the regime’s corruption. This deviant sexuality is reinforced and de-eroticised in order to render it taboo. Saadi’s sexual proclivities, which undermine normative sexual practices, include passive homosexual intercourse, rape, bestiality, incest and paedophilia. The narrator’s recounts his own sexual molestation by Saadi.

> I was younger than Saadi and his playing with me distracted me from sleep and the sun until I was taken by surprise when he reached out for my testicles. I jumped with fright and backed away until I was trapped against the water tank invisible in the dark corner. Meanwhile Saadi’s face maintained a dead-pan expression, a static picture as it were, an imbecilic smile and dead features...He whispered to me, “Don’t be afraid. I want us to play the chicken and cock game, the bride and groom, the goat and the ram, the bitch and the dog, the donkey and the she-ass...and he said, “If you don’t do it, I’ll tell my aunt-your mother-that you want to do me like a she-ass.”

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363 Massad, p. 386
364 Connell, (2005), p. 841
365 al-Ramli, p. 48
The resulting impression of this episode is one of contempt and disgust for anal sex, particularly for those who voluntarily engage in the feminine sexual role. As Saadi is overcome with sexual excitement the narrator is given the option of using his finger instead of his penis. When he draws it out of Saadi’s anus it is covered in faeces, clearly marking and de-eroticising male passive sex roles. In fact the experience is so repellent to the narrator that he ends up vomiting in disgust \(^\text{366}\); one cannot help wondering whether the same experience with a woman would be labelled in such clearly nauseating terms. Later, when Saadi becomes a high-ranking official promoted by the regime, (head of the League of the Leader’s Beloved), the reader realises that Saadi’s behaviour comes to represent the regime itself. Just as the regime is hypocritical and abhorrent, so is Saadi: he is a man who seeks to emasculate men under the auspices of an autocratic regime, ‘especially those men who oppose the despotic system or try to demonstrate individuality in the face of dictatorial power that aims at neutralizing and erasing any sign of insurrection through violent appropriation of the body.’ \(^\text{367}\) Whilst the regime executes Qasim for his desertion, which he committed to maintain his personal honour and integrity, Saadi, who also deserted, is accepted into its fold. His sins, crimes and desertion are forgotten when he becomes part of the regime, revealing that people who have no love of the homeland but only seek to satisfy their own desires, both sexual and political, are given power to rule over the nation through a corrupt state. \(^\text{368}\) The power of the state, which is clearly separated from a love of the nation, is inextricably linked and bound to male sexuality. The teleology of the nation therefore becomes bound to outcomes of male desire. The rape of Furat in *I’jaam* and the happy ending for Saadi in *al-Fattīt al-Muba’thar* leaves the reader with a sense that their sexual outcomes are inextricably bound to national outcomes.

**STATE VERSUS NATION, SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS, IN *I’JAAM AND AL-FATTI AL-MUBA’THAR***

At the heart of both these novels is a strong emphasis on recognising the Ba’athist state as a site of corruption, and completely separate from a conceptualisation of nation. Whilst both novels actively dissent from the state, they do so by deploying a notion of patriotism which diverges from state-directed nationalist discourse. As such, it is war,

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\(^\text{366}\) al-Ramli, p. 49
\(^\text{367}\) Aghacy, p.96
\(^\text{368}\) al-Ramli, p. 82
not warring, which is criticised; soldiers remain a privileged and promoted group within nationalist discourse. Whilst the nation becomes an important host to and cohesive site of fraternal male relations within a heteronormative framework, it is the state that is targeted, for its dominance and chauvinism and its maintenance of a patriarchal dictator.

It is interesting that in both novels the main characters occupy marginal positions in relation to the on-going conflict, either as a deserter or a disabled non-combatant. Furat, in *I'jaam*, is unable to participate in the conflict because of disability, which sets him at odds with a nation-state that has traditionally favoured and promoted militarised, physically empowered masculinity. However, the disability experienced by Furat and Falah in *I'jaam* cannot be likened to the disabilities—presumably—experienced by war veterans, which is generally cited to be an emasculating experience. Whilst previously active veterans generally associate disability with emasculation, and a less active role in society, Furat (along with Falah) celebrates his disability. This however is presented clearly in terms of an undermining of state hegemony rather than as a process of emasculation and feminisation of Furat.

We returned to the conscription centre in East Karada four times that month before we got the results of our re-examination. We were declared, “unfit and decommissioned from military service.” The committee had created new technical terms. Before we were “exempt” but now we were relegated to “unfit,” damaged goods in wartime. We didn’t feel an all-encompassing happiness but rather a feeling of comforting relief, because we knew that our deaths would be put off until the next notification, or the next committee or the next war. We celebrated that day by going to our favourite bar Mansour Mansour in Saadoun Street. The bar was next to the Iranian airlines office, which people had attacked during the first days of the war; it was now burned out and was being used as a urinal by drunks. We drank a toast to disability and listened to Um Kulthum singing...”

Whilst Furat in *I'jaam* is exempt from military service, Qasim in *al-Fatit al-Muba'thar* is an army deserter, which leads to his imprisonment and eventual execution. Even so, he has not abandoned his fellow Iraqis out of fear, but made a distinct and rational choice to preserve his philosophical outlook. Just as in national Iranian rhetoric the war is conceptualised as an imposed war, so too is it regarded an imposed war by the Iraqi civilians in these novels. Though the Ba'ath regime framed the war within a

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83 Antoon, p. 32-33
discourse of national defence, Qasim recognises the invasion of Iran by Iraq to be an act of aggression which had more to do with the irredentist aspirations of the state than a defence of the nation. As such, a fine distinction is drawn between Qasim’s thoughtful and rational denunciation of the war, which rejects an aggressive, hyper-masculine state, and the feminised desertion by Saadi, which neither rationalises the decision nor recognises duty, honour and patriotism.

Qasim justified his desertion to me, two months before his execution in the middle of the village square, as we stood on the bank of the Tigris...I remember from what he said, that he completely and utterly rejected the war because it did not suit his artistic inclinations, because he did not want to kill or be killed, and because the war was a farce he couldn’t stomach. As for Saadi, as was his habit when he was asked his opinion about something, whether it was the colour of tea to war or religion he would say either, “This is a nice thing,” or “This is not a nice thing.”

I used to call this type of opinion making which a million other people also share- “womanish criticism” or sometimes “harem critique,” or when I wanted to be facetious I would say, “the only technical term in the dictionary of feminine critical expression is “nice” or “not nice,” “I like it” or “I don’t like it.”

Both Qasim and Saadi have committed the same act, but its logic and reception are differently and distinctly gendered. Whilst Saadi’s lack of formulation and rationale is equated with a feminised deviant masculinity, Qasim’s desertion is integral to his morality and integrity. Despite the fact that the moral force in both of these novels comes from men who in most militarised contexts would be considered to be part of a subaltern group of non-combatants, they remain loyal to an idea of soldiering, though both novels are against the war itself. Soldiering as a fraternal activity is commensurate with the workings of the modern nation state and as such is neither rejected nor insulted by both caustically critical novels. This is perhaps because the military and the act of defending the nation, aid the consolidation of fraternity which composes the modern nation state.

This feeling of loyalty to one’s boys serves a central role in the experience of fighting men. Whatever the context and scale of the war, it is the ‘warriors camaraderie,’ often also referred
to as ‘male bonding,’ which is almost universally emphasised by whoever discusses what makes soldiers able to withstand the tremendous efforts and suffering involved in warfare.371

Novels which have focussed on life at the front-line have tended to present war as the ultimate act of male bonding and an extreme expression of fraternity. This type of literature (which was produced in both Iraq and Iran) broadly conforms to its English language literary counter-part, known in popular vernacular as “dick lit.” For example, Jasim al-Rasif’s novel *Hajabat al-Jahim*372 documents life on the front-line through the eyes of soldiers participating in the Banjwin/Penjwin campaign of 1983 in the north of Iraq. Though this is novel that does not concern itself with the direct glorification of regime propaganda, its main focus is on the horror and camaraderie through an intense panorama of the scenes of war. This novel can be summed up as both poignant and bawdy. It documents the horror of war at the same time as glorifying the masculinity of the soldier. For example, we often hear of soldiers in the narrator’s company boasting of victories on the battlefield and in the bedroom.372 Although al-Rasif does not simply reproduce government propaganda on the glories of war, the act of soldiering is steadfastly bound to masculinity, and the doubts and concerns of the narrator are linked to an inner fear of subordination and rejection, where femininity and women are feared and loved simultaneously.

I have not come across a woman who has loved me with the same daring that I have loved her. And with the same power which grows stronger and larger day after day. Except I remain in love with all the women of this earth...All women avoid me as if I am accursed. Maybe because I have been inflicted with spherical swellings which are called pimples; this curse means that red bubbles appear over my body. Perhaps due to this way of thinking I have made women more beautiful beings than they are so that they are even more repulsed by me.374

This novel is less-nuanced than the two Iraqi novels examined in-depth here, but it reports more normative social patterns associated with modern military masculinity. The military is the preserve of men, and of all the bureaucratic institutions that make up the state, it is the most reliant upon fraternal formulations of masculinity. Despite the vast gulf between Rasif’s, Antoon’s and al-Ramlí’s novels (in terms of theme,

371 Yuval-Davis, p.108  
372 Accurate translation without a professional translator of fiction is not possible due to the multiplicity and layers of meaning within the title. As such the title remains transliterated rather than translated.  
374 al-Rasif, p.10
perspective and quality of writing) they each protect and sympathise with soldiers and separate them from their actions, promoting male fraternal relations as the natural foundation for modern society. In this sense, as Nira Yuval-Davis has suggested in her discussion of Rebecca Grant and Carole Pateman’s works, the foundation of contract theories and well-functioning societies tends to assume ‘natural male characteristics,’ such as aggression (as asserted by Hobbes) and a natural capacity for reason in men (as asserted by Rousseau) and as such reject assumed feminine qualities.\footnote{Yuval-Davis, p. 2} In this sense both the soldiers sent to the frontline, and the main protagonists, who occupy a non-combat space, share elements of this rejection of the feminine along with a strong capacity for reason, which ultimately leads to a rejection of the war itself. This rejection of a deviant femininity is a common feature across the war novel. For example, in Betool Khedairi’s \textit{A Sky So Close}\footnote{Khedairi, (1999)}, strictly demarcated gender roles are adhered to as a perfect expression of civil society. This militarized relationship, which uses femininity to bolster masculinity, can be seen in the relationship that the narrator has with Salim-a sculptor- reminiscent of the other creative, intellectual masculinities that we encounter in \textit{I'jaam} and \textit{al-Fatit al-Muba'thar}. Despite his membership of a liberal-intellectual group, the protection of the notion of soldiering and the defence of the nation is paramount and is privileged over his relationship with the narrator. It is also important to note that soldiering in Antoon, al-Ramli and Khedairi’s novels is not associated with those men who carry out the oppressive work of the state, but with brave, duped or compelled individuals who are deeply honoured and whose bravery is celebrated and valorised. In \textit{I'jaam} and \textit{al-Fatit al-Muba'thar} in particular, characters defy and criticise militarised men but never those actually fighting an Iranian enemy. Soldiers remain separated from criticism of the state. This is perhaps because both these novels restrict their focus to civilian life, and tend to portray soldiers as those who have either been forced into battle or those who have been deluded by government propaganda. For example in \textit{al-Fatit al-Muba'thar} the reader is told about Abdul-Wahid, Qasim’s brother, who is depicted as being fooled by the regime into sacrificing his life for misplaced loyalties.

\begin{quotation}
Among all of “Nationan” Ijayel’s sons, Abdul-Wahid alone supported the war and complied with government laws lock, stock and barrel. He participated in most offensives until he was
\end{quotation}
“martyred defending for the homeland, dignity, sovereignty, honour, glory and soil” as his father would say, repeating the expressions from the TV, the radio, the government police chief and the main village party official.\(^{97}\)

Accordingly, when soldiers in al-Ramli’s novel come to realise that they are not fighting for their country but for the state they desert and the regime sets out to punish them.

The number of army desertions had increased recently, as had the search parties and inspection points to find them. Orders were issued which allowed people to shoot them even if they were not attempting to escape. Likewise public executions were held...\(^{98}\)

The protection of the image of the masculine soldier, as well as the promotion of a subaltern, intellectual masculinity offers an alternate vision of masculinity to the one appropriated by the state. This alternative masculinity rejects attempts to establish a state propagated image of masculinity as both “natural” and “normal” and offers an alternative to the bellicose, hyper-masculinity traditionally associated with a militarised state. This revision of male hegemony differs heavily from idealised male attributes based on patriarchy and tyranny instead choosing to renegotiate masculine hegemony through fraternal models which are moved away from state interests towards national interests. In \textit{I'jaam} the loyalty of soldiers is seen to be pulled between the notion of the family and their military duty.

“Do you believe that these soldiers will be judged together on doomsday or with their families? I mean what’s the order of affiliation?”

“Good question and I don’t have an answer. Does that mean you believe in doomsday?”

“No...only as an idea.”

“I don’t know and it’s not important right now...what is important is that I attend the lecture. You know my father will go crazy if he finds out that I have been expelled for absences.”

“Ha! Ha! You answered my question! The family, as an institution, is stronger than all the armies in the world.”

“Perhaps not for the English soldiers but in our society it is unfortunately!”

“Right...Do you think that if there is a judgement day that we will be judged together?”

“Don’t be afraid, I’ll find you.”

\(^{97}\) al-Ramli, p.28
\(^{98}\) Antoon, p. 54
The discussion between Areej and the narrator which takes place when they stumble upon a cemetery for English soldiers in Baghdad suggests that the concepts of nation and masculinity should be clearly distinguished from actions of the state. The family, which is considered at to be at the core of nation, will always be more powerful than an army that is associated with the state. Both novels present and promote alternative masculinities and challenge the readers’ idea of what the traits of hegemonic masculinity should be; and more importantly, how those traits should be associated with a nation and separated from a corrupt state. As such, even this alternative, subaltern masculinity, which is used to contest traditional understandings of patriotism and war, is merely a reformulation of fraternal, and heteronormative nation-statehood. These subaltern masculinities therefore take on and represent important aspects of hegemonic masculinity associated with the modern nation state, even though they would seem to represent a variegated typology of “traditional” masculinity.

It is important therefore to note that both of these novels are pro-nation even if they are anti-state. The nationalist sentiments of both these novels do not support the ideological dissemination of state sponsored propaganda, nor do they display typical characteristics of a war novel. The novels are neither dominated by fighting nor by the hyper-masculinised, sexualised heroes that Cooke finds in her understanding of men in Iraqi war literature. Whilst more traditional war stories like Hajabat al-Jahim by Jasim al-Rasif, and even more mainstream novels such as Kam Badat al-Sama’ Quriha! by Betool Khedairi represent less complicated and more traditional visions of ideal masculinity, many of these novels examine masculinity through the lens of a modern nation-state at war. That is to say, despite the variety and range of male representations in the texts, and regardless of the position they occupy on the political spectrum, all of these novels place these representations within the framework of nation. Therefore the reification of new models of younger male hegemony are crystallised through fraternal bonds, throwing off patriarchal subservience.

**THE ROLE OF PATRIARCHY IN *Jaam and al-Fatt al-Muba’thar***

The father as a patriarchal figure remains a controversial symbol in the novels in this study. It is no surprise that these novels about life during war document the experience of the younger generation, the demographic that is most likely to be drafted or

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mobilised to support frontline operations in factories, hospitals etc. Just as male sexuality has been observed to be an apologue for bad governance (particularly that linked to colonial powers) so the father figure takes on wider significance when the whole structure of the nation is played out through a notion of modernity that forces the older man into redundancy; it is the younger generation who are charged with defending the nation. It is important to note that in this instance it is not just men who undertake this responsibility but also women. For example, the reader often observes the protagonist in *A Sky So Close* engaging in activities to support military operations, though these are inherently gendered activities. Despite the assertion that ‘militarization may privilege masculinity, but it does so by manipulating the meanings of both masculinity and femininity,’ what it fails to nuance is that it is only some men who are privileged by their participation in military action. In this sense, whilst mobilization does consolidate specific ideas about masculinity and femininity, it also undermines and reformulates ideals of masculinity, namely, older men face the reality of being superfluous to requirement. Older men, therefore, are largely absented from the action, or are feminised, for example, as they mourn with the women for their martyred sons. When Furat’s grandmother in *Ijaam* relates an incident at church where the body of a dead soldier is returned to his family, the father’s grief is considered distinctly feminine. Like the father figure who is the male protagonist in Maysalun Hadi’s novel about the 1991 American invasion ‘*Alam Naqis *an Wahid (The World Minus One), these men are emasculated and powerless in times of war. Just like women, they are defended but not given clearly defined terms of masculinity with which to place themselves within stories of war and nation.

“You should have seen what happened in church today. They brought in the body of this young man, a soldier, so handsome. Like the moon! And his father had gone mad, just mad. He was dancing and singing, ‘My son’s not dead. He’s not dead.’ Poor thing. He was an engineer and left two children behind. His wife was there, too. She was tearing out her hair. How they cried! And his father danced and cried like a woman.”

As a result of the empowerment of younger men during wartime, narratives of hierarchical dominance based on age are largely erased in favour of those who are

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Khedairi, p. 91


depicted as defending the nation. Traditional patterns of power are disrupted and challenged as power and prestige is awarded to younger men. Concomitantly, older men who refuse to relinquish their power over their sons become a site of contestation. Consequently, younger men, when empowered by wartime privileges, are generally also seen as the biggest threat to the state. This perceived threat to the power of the state, as Laleh Khalili notes, means that:

Gender demographies are often invoked as justification for targeting young men, and more instrumentally, for planning military action. ‘Youth bulges’, a demographic profusion of men between the ages of 15 and 30, especially in Muslim countries, is seen as a structural condition underlying extremism, and as a ‘problem’ to be addressed militarily in far away places. Young men are seen as an automatically useful resource for radical recruitment, and women’s education and job creation programmes are advocated as necessary antidotes.\(^a\)

Perhaps this is the reason that dissidence, resistance to and rejection of state power is carried out by younger male protagonists, that is, those who strive to assert their authority over patriarchal dominance. Just as al-Ramli and Antoon actively condemn the state and its deviance through sexuality, a notion of oppression and backwardness is generated when the patriarch is promoted at the expense of the fraternal. In an episode in *I'jaam*, the state awards a medal to a father for killing his son, murdering him, claiming that the motive was that the son had refused to return to his military unit. This episode has strong implications for the representation of male hierarchies and power, as the state clearly exploits non-normative behaviour to further its own interests and narratives.

The leader was awarding a medal of courage to a man who killed his son for refusing to return to his military unit. When the “hero” was asked to narrate the details of his heroism, though, it appeared as though he had killed his son after an argument that had no relationship to nationalist duty, but rather a family dispute. It didn’t matter. His heroism was used to embolden the spirit of victory and to establish the icon of a new citizen-one who puts country before all else, even his own blood.\(^b\)

Furthermore this episode explains the state’s position on citizenship and the author’s opposition to this position. Whilst the state promotes a patriarchal position which is detrimental to society, the author clearly emphasise the importance of building the notion of a nation-state through a fraternal nuclear family. As opposed to a patriarchal

\(^a\) Khalili, p. 1475
\(^b\) Antoon, p. 55
extended family, the fraternal social contract as a means for organising society and promoting normative relations between men, is widely recognised, and is a central theme in this novel. Just as the judgement of the English soldiers in *I'jaam* is interpreted through a militaristic pull between the nation and the family, so the deviant notion of a father killing his son poses a challenge to the notional integrity of a modern nation-state, that is, a state in which homosocial bonding signifies progress, whilst patriarchy symbolizes an obstacle to modernity. The episode in which the leader awards a father a medal for filicide serves as an allegory for the wider entrenchment of dictatorial power over the nation. As Elias Khoury states:

> Entire countries have been turned into prisons, with the Arab “patriarch” in his perpetual autumn dominating all aspects of everyday life, turning the media and all public space into a mirror to idolize and mummify the present.\(^{386}\)

The father is an obstacle to progression just as young men are a threat, as well as a site of change. They are the symbol of resistance to the old Arab patriarch. For Qasim in *al-Fatīt al-Mubātthar* rejection of the state also means challenging his own father, who is very much a site of resistance and confrontation in the novel. This resistance is predominantly explored through perceptions of nationalism and patriotism, how these are constituted and how they relate to the governance of the state and its relationship with the land of Iraq. Whilst Ijayel embodies a state-sponsored understanding of nationalism, one which the novel sets out to criticise, Qasim promotes and understands an idea of the land and nation of Iraq that is clearly separated from the deviance of the state. Ijayel’s unquestioning allegiance to the state is juxtaposed with Qasim’s more fluid, philosophical and deeper love of homeland. However, by the time Ijayel comes round to Qasim’s way of thinking, Qasim has been executed for desertion in the middle of the village square. At the beginning of the novel Ijayel is described as being recognizable by

> Three characteristics, two of them no other entity in the world shared. In addition to his prescription glasses...there was his jingoist obsession that bordered on worship. At least it seems like that when in a loud speech-making voice he addressed the assembly in the village cafe.\(^{387}\)

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\(^{387}\) al-Ramlī, p. 24
His nationalism is constructed through both comedy and violence. Ijayel repeatedly rants about the time his father killed an "English officer (son of a bitch)" and refers to everything he approves of as "nationan," his mispronunciation of the English word "national." Ijayel’s definition and proclamations of nationalism articulate and reinforce pro-state propaganda, whilst Qasim, carrying the novel’s message, attempts to narrate an understanding of nationalism distinct from that promoted by the ruling regime. It is through the relationship between these two protagonists that the novel illustrates itself as pro-Iraq but anti-regime. Ijayel’s version of nationalism is shown to be the product of state-sponsored brainwashing through an aggressive propaganda strategy, narrating nationalism through a cult of personality in order to make the position of “the leader” unimpeachable. By the end of the novel Ijayel realises the true meaning of Qasim’s philosophical views, through his artwork. Realising and accepting his son’s views, Ijayel grows increasingly more silent, more emaciated and more disabled until eventually he dies.** His disempowerment, emasculation and eventual extinction remove him from his role as patriarch, as he is relegated to a role of near total absence, doing nothing more than being silent and crying as he ponders his son’s philosophy.

**al-Ramli, p. 79
Official Iranian attitudes towards the Iran-Iraq War, as seen in much of the Literature of Perseverance, produced by the publishing house Huzah Hunari, tends to portray the Iraqis as US lackeys undertaking an imperialist agenda against the newly formed Islamic republic of Iran. This fiction is heavily rooted in depictions of a modern day Karbala paradigm, with the war being undertaken as part of religiously motivated national defence. Despite its adoption by the regime, which has awarded it several literary accolades, *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* is a departure from this narrative. The novel seeks out a “real” frontline and depicts a war fought by teenagers, who at first are enthralled by the regime’s rhetoric of the youth of Islam but end up being enchanted by opportunities for homosociality and freedom from paternalistic control.

Published in 1996, *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* has been through several re-printings and has won many state literary prizes. Its reception, however, has remained mixed. As Professor Ghanoonparvar notes in the introduction to his English translation of the novel *A Fortune Told in Blood*: ‘One critic….for example, even reprimanded the translator of Ahmad Dehqan’s *Journey to Heading 270 degrees* for translating what he considered to be a heretical novel.’ The importance and pressure placed on veterans-cum-authors to depict the war within a prescribed narrative, has meant that *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* has been rejected by more dogmatic critics and remains a controversial novel. Dehqan’s refusal to glorify the war and subsume his male characters to a state narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom, has meant that Dehqan is considered an iconoclast by some, whilst for others his adoption by the regime means he remains the cornerstone of state literary narratives. Unlike some other novels produced by veterans, *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* questions and tests the ideology of the war, and attempts to take the experience of the war out of a rigidly religious framework.

For the purposes of this study the novel poses a problem because some consider it an autobiographical work. Indeed, the novel’s translator, Paul Sprachman, has

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89 Ghanoonparvar, ‘Introduction,’ p. xv
maintained that the novel belongs to the genre of memoir writing, as opposed to being a ‘fully realized work of fiction.’ I contend, however, that whilst a copious amount of literature exists about the war which is either biographical or autobiographical, Dehqan’s novel does not fall into either category. Indeed Dehqan has published two separate volumes of memoirs, *Satarah-ha-y Shalamchah* (The Stars of Shalamcheh) published in 1991 and *Ruzha-y Akhar* (The Last Days) published in 2006 both of which have been classified separately from his works of fiction by their publisher. This novel unlike his works of autobiography this novel is not the direct telling of Dehqan’s own story even if it draws on his experience. As is explicitly stated, the novel ‘is not a history of a particular unit, but instead tries to speak for all units and all soldiers.’

*Journey Heading 270 Degrees* examines life on the front-line as a member of the Basiji, through the eyes of Naser, a high school student who has previously been on the frontline. From the beginning of the novel he longs to return to the frontline, and goes without hesitation when his best friend Ali comes to fetch him back to take part in the Iranian defence in operation Karbala V. He returns to his unit against the express wish of his father, and the novel sets out to uncover his experience and his motivation by providing meticulous detail of his unit moving out to the frontline in order to succeed in their mission to secure the Shalamcheh Road.

The major concern of the novel, however, is not simply to tell Naser’s story, but to ascertain why he is pulled by such an irresistible desire to return to the frontline time and time again. The novel clearly distinguishes between a religiously motivated state narrative and a fraternally motivated reality, as the camaraderie of the unit cannot be replicated outside of the combat zone. As Paul Sprachman notes in the introduction to his English translation, ‘what lures Naser back to the front a second time, after having been wounded the first time he served, is not patriotism, but the irresistible tug of camaraderie. As many people who have endured basic training and fought together as young adults know, military service often forges lifelong bonds.’ The novel depicts an experience of war in which the protagonist is more adrift and isolated at home than he.

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23 Sprachman, p. xi
24 Sprachman, (2008), p. xi
is at the front. This estrangement is captured and explained in the novel by the peculiar circumstances of life at the front; the violence, terror and sense of camaraderie explains the psychology of teenagers growing up in a terrifying set of circumstances.

Naser’s development as a character begins in medias res. His reasons for fighting and his attitudes towards the war have already been established during his first experiences with the unit, experiences not directly elucidated to the reader. The novel does not explicitly deal with Naser’s past, instead choosing to focus on his present. The novel avoids retrospection and flashbacks, choosing instead to rely on a sense of immediacy to initiate the reader into the unit. Instead of removing the reader from the focus of the present, the construction of Naser’s character and his commitment to serving on the frontline is experienced by proxy, through Rasul, a new recruit.

Rasul’s development as a character allows the reader to trace Naser’s origins and does much to explain his world view. We see Rasul develop from a wide-eyed recruit to seasoned Basiji in a matter of days. The conflation of Naser’s past with Rasul’s present leaves the reader with the impression that the novel is an expeditious and universal bildungsroman for these teenage soldiers as they pass from boyhood to manhood in the space of a few days on the front line.

At the beginning of the novel Rasul is an eager volunteer who has signed up after two of his elder brothers were martyred in the war. Originally assigned to work for the quartermaster and away from combat, he protests until he is allowed to join Naser’s platoon as an assistant to the munitions officer. The beginning of the novel depicts Rasul as an enthusiastic, eager-to-please and naïve young boy. He is obeisant to his superiors and seeks their approval, hero-worshipping anyone with battle experience. This all changes when he is forbidden from accompanying the unit into battle. His response is to defy orders and race after the transport trucks in order to join his comrades.

Heydar and Rasul stood facing each other. Heydar stretches out his hand to take his hand in his but Rasul pays him no attention. Suddenly he turns and starts running in our direction. Heydar momentarily stands still and he picks up a solid gait after him. As Rasul chases after us

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Dehqan, p. 54
Dehqan, p. 54
my hands are shaking and I shout out: “Rasul...Rasul...We are over here, we are over here.” The guys sitting in the cab who can’t see anything ask: “He’s coming? What happened?” Rasul sprints to us and passes me his weapon. I take it grab him and pull him up and make space for him to stand...We fall about laughing loudly. Rasul pays no mind to us. He is standing facing the wind to calm the fire inside him."

From this point on Rasul is an equal, a brother-in-arms who goes through terrifying and formative experiences on the battlefield alongside his comrades in the largest offensive undertaken by the Iranian forces during the war. He encounters chemical weapons, sleeps alone in a foxhole under enemy fire and experiences the loss of many of his fellow unit members. With so many of the characters in the novel killed in the battle, the most traumatic being that of Ali, Naser’s best friend and the one who came to fetch him back to the battlefield, Rasul’s survival generates a continuity in the novel; the reader finally understands why Naser is so drawn to the front. When Naser leaves the fighting to return home at the end of the battle, it is Rasul who takes Ali’s place and he is the one who promises to send word to Naser when it is time for him to come back to the unit. Rasul is now a fully-fledged soldier, who is able to tell war stories and share in the jokes with the other boys.

The novel emphasises human, and more importantly, male relationships over the official narrative that interweaves religiosity and nationalism, as it asks why so many young men felt the desire to fight in the war. Rasul’s experience initiates the reader into the unit, enveloping the reader with a feeling of loyalty and fraternity outside of the parameters and limitations of normative social experience. Naser’s wish for fraternity is inextricably linked to his desire to escape the normalising and oppressive social frameworks which both accord older men power over younger men, and upper-class men power over lower-class men. *Safar bah Garay 270 Darajah* depicts not just life in an army unit but life in an army without traditional military structures. Rasul’s defiance of Heydar, his military commander, in the above-mentioned episode indicates that the novel privileges individual agency over military orders. Whilst the life of a soldier is generally subject to strict and fixed military hierarchies, Rasul’s defiance of his commander illustrates a resistance to older male authority figures, a boldness which is encouraged by his compatriots as they help him jump onto the back of the truck and then celebrate his disobedience. This defiance, which goes unpunished, and

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Dehqan, p. 96-97
to some extent is even viewed indulgently by Heydar, indicates a world in which traditional hierarchies have been discarded. That is to say, that while traditional army structures are intensely hierarchical, class-based and often privilege members according to age, class and experience, in this novel this is swept aside in favour of personal glory, friendship and patriotism.

There was, of course, a socio-historical dimension to Dehqan’s fictional representation of this “volunteer” army. Following the revolution, the Iranian army was subject to deep and pervasive purges aimed at weeding out monarchist sympathisers. These purges inevitably targeted the upper classes as ‘12,000 military personnel, the majority of whom were officers’ were discharged from an army to Islamicize it. As a result, the regime came to rely upon religiously based paramilitary groups such as the Basij and the Pasdaran to defend Iran from the attacks by Iraq in the first years of the war. These groups tended to composed of young, lower-class Islamists, generally drawn from the urban poor, the same group that formed the backbone of the regime’s support. These elements were strategically favoured over anyone connected to the previous regime, and who, by proxy, were regarded as possessing dubious loyalties. Given the demographic composition of Iranian resistance, it comes, perhaps, as no surprise to see the novel depicting young male soldiers acting outside of the parameters of traditional military organization. These young men had little in the way of formal training and were often asked to participate in human wave attacks as a substitute for equipment and weaponry. As such the way the war was fought was subject to specific class elements which bled into ideological confrontations with the army and traditional military structures. In light of such conditions, the educated elite that composed the officer class would have ordered lower-class recruits onto the battlefield. Now this was countered by a culture of militarised martyrdom that effectively sidelined professional soldiering in favour of passionate volunteers. The ‘Sacred Defense’ was a war of ideology; in many ways a war fought by the “people” rather than an army. Hence it is no surprise that the male characters in novels under discussion here resist traditional military structures, relying instead on the companionship of their comrades and promises of martyrdom.

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61 Roberts, p. 46
The comradeship between the soldiers in Naser’s unit is integral to the novel’s depiction of life on the frontline. The antics of the soldiers are an enticing prospect as they eat, drink and sleep together, developing bonds closer than family. These bonds between members of the units, particularly between Ali and Naser, demonstrate why Naser privileges Ali’s wishes and desires over those of his own family. It is not just for the sake of his country that he joins the war effort. His return to the defence of Iran comes with the proviso: he must join his old company. When this is initially refused he accuses the soldier in personnel of being ‘new to the company…one of those 180-day wonders that they force to go to the front.’ His part in the war is inextricably linked to the other men that he goes out to fight with. The space on the frontline that Naser carves out with those comrades is an important link to the exceptional space and the empowerment that war creates for these young men. At times these all male preserves come close to becoming a homoerotic space. However, the novel never actually transgresses a heteronormative understanding of male sexuality, though it does teasingly hover on the margins. When Ali, Naser’s best friend, forgets his sleeping bag, he asks to share Naser’s sleeping bag. When he makes his request he does so flirtatiously, trying to entice Naser to share a traditionally private heteronormative space and transform it into a comradely, homosocial space.

“Brother...My dear brother Naser!” He says this in childish voice. I say, “What is it? I am over here.” He serenely makes his way over to me. “Where are you my dear brother?” Masoud props himself up and says, “Oh! You are captivating.” Ali stands over my head and says, “As long as I have my brother Naser I will never be captivated, my dear brother…” I cut him off and say: “What has happened that you have become brotherly all of a sudden?” Masoud says: “Don’t listen to a word he says until he grows up…” Suddenly the sound of shelling and Katyusha rockets being fired into the sky shuts out any other sounds. The earth falls off the walls of the bunker over our heads and faces…”Look my lovely brother I didn’t bring my sleeping bag.” “In this cold,” I ask in surprise. Involuntarily I sat up. Not discouraged he says: “Brother! It’s one night not one thousand nights-We can sleep in the same sleeping bag, can’t we?” I ask “In the same sleeping bag?!”

This episode becomes indicative of the unique relationships between male characters that develop on the frontline. Ali’s flirtatious manner displays a muted homoeroticism forbidden in civilian space. This does not, however, mean the transgression of any physical boundaries but rather the exploration of the boundaries of platonic love is

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* Dehqan, p. 46
* Dehqan, p. 105-106
pushed to its extreme. The young men seize the opportunity the war has given them to explore homosocial bonds in a way that would not be permitted or possible in civilian spaces. These homosocial discoveries are deeply interconnected with male virginity or, at the very least, modesty and sexual abstinence. All of the soldiers in the unit are innocent, virgin young men, and, therefore, worthy defenders of the nation. Unlike the Iraqi protagonists who narrate and act out heterosexuality in order to highlight the deviance of the state, the male characters in *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* prize their virginity as the marker of ideal masculinity. Just as male sexuality has been claimed as a metonymic mode of representation and an apologue for national destiny in the Arabic novel, Iranian masculinity, and its links to virginity and sacrifice, has been an endless resource for spirituality in the Persian novel.

The Iranian soldiers in *Journey Heading 270 Degrees*, despite their exploration of the boundaries and borders of homosocial bonds, are wedded to their purity and their virginity as the ultimate credential of manliness. On their way to the front Ali and Naser are told by an old male driver they have hitched a lift off that:

> If it was the inheritance from my father I would reward you with it, in return for your manliness, and your youth. A man doesn’t have to keep things bottled up inside him. Being a man is not just about the twenty grams of meat in his trousers. It’s something else. Manhood is in his being.

The driver’s definition of manliness, or more importantly his concept of ideal masculinity, is taken out of the phallic realm and placed in a spiritual or natural realm. The sensitivity of the young men in Naser’s unit is idealised and becomes part of an idealised masculinity as the men’s sexual innocence is linked to the teleology of the nation. Naser’s own embarrassment at the driver’s frank references to his sexual organs further consolidates this view. The sexual innocence of the young men is integral to their defence of their nation and their ability to engage in homosocial closeness without it becoming a sexual transgression. The close relationships between the members of Naser’s unit, and their idealised masculinities, lie at the heart of their empowerment to resist patriarchal masculinities- symbolised by their resistance to both

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Dehqan, p. 37
the wishes of their military superiors who would order them onto the battlefield, and the tyranny of their fathers who would stop them coming to the frontline.

Traditionally the rule of the father displayed all the patterns routinely associated with vertical models of power. Power was accorded to males (and on occasion females) according to a number of factors including class, economic status, age and physical power. Naser’s household displays all of the characteristics of a traditional patriarchal household but with one important difference: the war. Naser’s individual agency, his wants, needs and desire can be realised against the wishes of the father because Naser is empowered by the fraternal bonds he has developed within his unit. This exploration of male friendship within a military context has a well-established precedent in modern Iranian rhetoric. Whilst the home remains a bastion of patriarchal male oppression, the war provides a new space for exploring fraternal relations and camaraderie. This space has been widely explored in sacred defense narratives. In fact just as the Karbala paradigm is seen as integral to the sacrifice inherent within martyrdom, it also showcases an opportunity for new relationships outside of the family. As Pedram Partovi observes in his study of ‘filmfarsi’ “The representations of Basiji camaraderie in the cinema of the sacred defense also promote the notion of their sacrifice for the sake of male friendship. Such relationships have long organised Iranian life outside of the home and, significantly, also figure heavily in filmfarsi.”

War, which privileges the physical strength of younger men, creates a binary between strong soldier and weak civilian. Inevitably it rearranges the power relationships in Naser’s household, and ultimately is responsible for his escape from patriarchal oppression connected to the family home.

Naser’s ability to defy his father is directly afforded him by the empowering status given to combatants in wartime. Naser’s father, like Ijayel in the Iraqi novel Al-Fatat al-Muba’thar, is representative of an old social hierarchy that is being rejected in a changing wartime society. Whilst Qasim challenges his father on an intellectual level, Naser, privileged by his status as a combatant, rejects his father both physically and philosophically. Naser is able to challenge his father’s traditional views of social advancement, and more importantly he is able to resist his father’s physical presence. Whilst the father is still a symbol of fear and authority for Naser’s sister Roya, and his

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*Partovi, p. 522*
brother Mustafa, this is not the case for Naser. Naser’s physical demeanour and military experience divests his father of power over him, thus asserting the primacy of militarised fraternal power over domesticated patriarchal power. When Naser’s father receives the news that Naser will return to the frontline, he decides to take up smoking again, and is questioned about it by his very young daughter Roya. The rage and loss of control over his oldest son means that it is she that bears the brunt of his wrath.

Father brings his hand back and punches so hard in the ear that it lays her out flat on the ground, as if she was a piece of dirt that he was brushing off himself. Roya lies face down on the floor, she screws her face up in tears and slowly her face turns more and more purple. None of us move...Mustafa cowers. Father stares at the television screen. The whites of his eyes are blood shot. He puffs ravenously on the cigarette between his lips. The corners of Father’s eyes are full of tears and the cigarette between his lips trembles...It was like the days when father would reach for the belt and I would cower, trembling in the corner of the room."

When Father strikes out at Roya he sends shockwaves of fear through the family unit. His anger can be directed indiscriminately, (after all it is Naser who the father is angry with), and without prejudice. Fear pervades the room causing Mustafa to cower, wondering whether he too will be a victim of father’s anger. For Naser, however, there is no direct threat. The days of his own fear belong to his old status as a subordinate to his father’s will. Now that Naser has served at the frontline, and been empowered by war and society, he is excluded from his father’s tyrannical behaviour. The father is unable to oppress Naser, either physically or mentally, and cannot prevent him from returning to the front line. His anger is transferred to weaker members of his family, those who cannot or do not have the tools or resources to resist him.

Naser’s battle experience and increased physical status in conjunction with the father’s diminishing physicality is the major contribution to his decline as an authority figure. Ageism is rife throughout the novel, as continuing assumptions are made about male status through physical prowess. Naser’s father is a contemptible figure; not just because he is cold and authoritarian but because he is physically weak. Reflecting a wider social trend, Naser’s father is disempowered by a regime that relies heavily upon the ability and power of its young male supporters to implement the changes it envisions for Iranian society: ‘the revolutionary leadership could provide guidance, but

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"Dehqan, p. 17"
the responsibility for accomplishing the new society’s goals fell largely to the youth.\textsuperscript{405} The new organising principles of society relied upon youthful supporters to implement its wishes and to defend the nation against a far superior military force, and therefore were highly privileged in state rhetoric. A consequence of this is that many narratives written during the Iran-Iraq War, including Dehqan’s novel, depict the disintegration of patriarchal power. By Naser’s father’s own admission: ‘once you reach fifty years of age, your strength will fade away,’\textsuperscript{406} thus signalling his own physical decline in contrast with the strength and power of youth.

Whilst older men are not always cold and authoritarian figures like Naser’s father, they are all at some time or another resisted. There is Heydar, the older commander, who Rasul openly defies when he intends to leave Rasul behind when the unit moves out to the frontline. Equally, Abdullah who is only thirty\textsuperscript{407} is described as ‘middle-aged’ and ‘solidly built’\textsuperscript{408} and who as one of the older men in the unit assumes a fatherly role. Naser describes him as ‘looking at Rasul as though he is one of his children. I do not know whether he is a father, but at his age he must be.’\textsuperscript{409} Unlike his own cold, authoritarian father, the older men in his unit are more sympathetically drawn. Heydar is an eccentric but capable warrior, whilst Abdullah is a warm and caring role model for Rasul. Despite this they are merely obstacles to overcome in Rasul’s struggle to go to the frontline. Whilst Heydar and Abdullah’s paternal roles are quickly undermined by Rasul, these older men are still afforded status as combatants within a warm and fraternal atmosphere. By contrast Naser’s father clings to his patriarchal status and as such represents everything that Naser rejects. Even his physical appearance is harsh and alienating in comparison with those of the men in the unit. Naser’s father’s beard is ‘prickly and coarse’\textsuperscript{410} contrasting with the platoon leader’s beard at the front which is described as ‘soft’ when it strokes Naser’s face.\textsuperscript{411} The sense of relief when Naser leaves his family home and returns to his unit is palpable. Every sense is awakened as he falls into his comrades’ arms and is enveloped by the familiar smells of his unit. Naser’s return to his unit is like a homecoming after time in a foreign land. The equality and

\textsuperscript{405} Partovi, p. 516  
\textsuperscript{406} Dehqan, p. 14  
\textsuperscript{407} Dehqan p. 54  
\textsuperscript{408} Dehqan, p. 55  
\textsuperscript{409} Dehqan, p. 37  
\textsuperscript{410} Dehqan, p.25  
\textsuperscript{411} Dehqan, p. 17
familiarity of his unit turns his unit into normality whilst the outside world becomes increasingly alien.

Just as Qasem and Ijayel in *Al-Fatit al-Muba’thar* represent two philosophical polarities, Naser and his father become polarised by their social views. Naser’s father is shaped by pre-revolutionary ideals-viewing social organisation through a framework which is inherently patriarchal. Naser’s father’s tyranny over his family reflects the vertical nature of power, an authority that Naser resists and rejects by going to the frontline. In line with the modernising programmes of the Pahlavi era, Naser’s father subscribes to a middle-class western view of social advancement, that is, through education. He is immensely proud of his son for taking his high school exams and condemns his own lack of education. Naser and his father each envision the path to success, or more specifically to empowerment, very differently. For Naser’s father social success and empowerment come through the traditional avenues of education; he cannot understand the desire to serve at the front. For Naser’s father frontline service is something that is imposed upon people because they have failed to achieve academically.

Study, study hard lad so that you will be accepted for university admission! At least don’t fall behind other people’s children so that they don’t say that you had to go to the front because you didn’t study. Don’t grow-up like me, dumb and illiterate.  

Furthermore, serving at the front is perceived by Naser’s father as a source of shame. This view that social success should be measured through education and exams is almost alien to Naser, who decides to leave for the front before completing his last exam. Naser’s father tries to explain participation in the war through the rigid parameters of civilian life. These parameters conflate the war with issues of class and education, something that can be broadly applied to the problems associated with Iran-Iraq War literature in general. Through Naser, Dehqan offers an alternative reading of the war, one which is both empowering and tragic. The pre-revolutionary framework for social mobility which forms Naser’s father’s world view is the foundation of the vast gulf between himself and Naser. Naser’s desire to return to the front is emptied of social meaning and awarded something stronger and more valuable.

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13 Dehqan, p. 13
than social mobility or religious sentiment. The boys in Naser’s unit are closer to him than his own family and the society he has pledged to protect.

The closeness that the men of the unit feel towards one another is further enhanced by their alienation from the outside world and its petty concerns with social mobility, education and the everyday concerns of daily life. After many of Naser’s unit die and he is to return home after being injured Naser overhears an old couple who are waiting for the train with him. They are using up-market language peppered with foreign expressions.

As I walk through the waiting room here is an old man and an old woman in front of me discussing air pollution and I hear them saying something like “invarshun.” Nothing about them looks like they would use such bombastic words. It’s the first time that I have encountered the word and I have no idea what it means.  

The couple’s pretentiousness seems not only pointless and insignificant in light of the horrors that Naser has been through, but it also depicts an unbridgeable gap between civilian and soldier. Fresh from the battlefield, the reader now understands what was previously inexplicable to a non-combatant. At the beginning of the novel it is difficult to understand Naser’s desire to return to the frontline, particularly as he is tantalisingly close to graduating from high school. However, by the end of the novel, after the reader has experienced the battlefield with Naser, as well as his friendships and in turn mourning the loss of those friends, a return to ‘normal’ life seems impossible. The tragedy is that these young men have become alienated from the very society that they were called upon to defend. Whilst Dehqan was criticised for not adhering to the pro-war narrative extolled by the regime, ‘he confronts the distressing reality that many soldiers faced when the War was over. They realized their wounds and sacrifices had become routine to people at home,’ as the fate of these soldiers was reduced to simply yet another strand of discourse to be extolled or resisted.

In many ways this small episode in which Naser is alienated from the civilian couple, teases out the paradoxes the Iran-Iraq War generated in contemporary Iranian society. Dehqan presents a world in which two societies exist. Both are cut off from one another, and are divided by their commitment either to neo-liberal middle class aspirations reflective of the Pahlavi era or to the ideals of an Islamic revolutionary

Dehqan, p. 219  
Sprachman, p. xii
government. Caught between these two worlds is the soldier, who is either co-opted or rejected; and as such remains loyal only to the fraternal bonds which have come at such a high price. Naser’s rejection of middle-class values could be read as an allegory for the reformulation of social success that was envisioned by an Islamic modernity. However, whilst the novel rejects simplistic middle-class readings of Iran-Iraq War combatants it does not enforce a state-sponsored Islamic narrative. In fact, the government centre of Tehran and the clerical bastion of Qom feel very far away as the soldiers of the unit are sent into battle.

The empowering experience of war, which provides so many opportunities for Naser to explore his masculinity, comes at an emotional and psychological cost. The opportunity for close fraternal bonds that entice and envelop the young male participants takes on an increasingly tragic dimension. Naser’s dislocation from civilian life, which closes off and limits his emotional and psychological experiences, is not the only tragedy to befall him. Part of this dislocation is caused by the brutal and unpredictable nature of war itself. Whilst war has provided Naser with a unique opportunity to create the deep fraternal bonds that underpin the defence of the nation, it also is the cause of great tragedy. Naser has to endure the brutal and violent deaths of his comrades. Their deaths are not romanticised, instead they entrench violence onto the lives of the soldiers.

Ali let out a guttural wail that I would not have guessed a human could make as he is consumed by the tank’s caterpillar tracks….I run like a crazy person to Ali’s side, but it is as if I am in the Sky and I am running on clouds and I will never reach him. The way seems to become longer…When I reach him and I stand above him, He stares fixedly at me with a look of disbelief and terror, I sit. The tank has rolled over his torso and his major artery is still spurting blood and his left eye is moving. He has been cut in half-exactly into two pieces. I cradle his head and the top half of his body in my arms, the lower half has been mangled by the caterpillar treads of the tank.10

Ali’s death is not written epically or romantically. It is terse, to the point and extremely brutal and, more importantly, is deeply formative for the survivors. It carves trauma and grief onto the unit and into the lives of the soldiers. In war, death becomes a random act, a constant threat hanging over the daily life of the unit. The seemingly nebulous and violent forces at work during war are a trade-off for the close fraternal

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10 Dehqan, p. 148
bonds that it creates. The soldiers’ alienation from society and their closeness to each other heightens their awareness of these nebulous forces controlling their fate. There is a sense that their situation is imbued with a supernatural force which they are only occasionally aware of. Before Ali’s grisly death, Naser dreams of his impending demise.

Milky coloured smoke rises from the ground. Quickly we pass the never-ending embankment. Ali runs in front, sweating blood. I shout, “Ali, stop...Stop Ali!” He stops dead and turns back to me and with lacerated eyes looks at me. His face becomes redder and redder: The colour of blood. At once I understand that his face is not bleeding but blood has been poured into a mould of his face and then it has congealed. In a state of disbelief I mutter “Ali,” under my breath. As soon as the word comes out of my mouth the mould of his face is broken up and the blood spattered into the air.  

Naser’s dream about Ali’s death\(^\text{116}\) points to a faith in predestination defined and determined by external and other-worldly forces. Naser’s closeness to Ali allows him to gain insight into his fate, affording him an understanding of predestination that is missing from his civilian life. The novel’s insights into the vicissitudes of fortune provide a tragic element to the narrative. Naser’s life, his emotional, psychological and physical well-being, is subject to the enigmatic forces which govern the lives of those on the frontline; even those acting in the context of human freewill. In foretelling the death of Ali through dreams, Dehqan uses Naser to point out to a widely recognised phenomenon among Iran-Iraq War combatants. As Roxanne Varzi points out in her extensive discussion of war culture in Iran:

There was a sense that being present at the front allowed a soldier to see with an open heart. Stories circulated widely of the ability that soldiers had to foretell their own deaths. The Basij in Shiraz tell me of a soldier who in his last will and testament says that he does not want his body to be found after he dies, and indeed they never find his body. Another man, a painter, whose work now hangs in Shah Cherag in Shiraz, painted a portrait of Imam Husayn using orange as the primary colour. His friend asks him why orange? It should be red for blood. He tells him to wait, that it soon will be. He turns at that very moment and is struck by a bomb, causing his blood to spill over the painting.”\(^\text{115}\)

\(^{115}\) Dehqan, p. 65  
\(^{116}\) Dehqan, p.65  
\(^{118}\) Varzi, p. 84
This sensitivity to higher powers resonates with a narrative that was pervasive among soldiers during the war. It generates a perception that the fate of the characters has already been determined, conveying a sense of inevitability determining an outcome based on random forces rather on merit and reward.

Whilst war, and the nebulous and violent forces that surround it, govern the lives of male combatants in the Iran-Iraq War novels discussed here, they also offer male soldiers an opportunity to form bonds which cannot be replicated in the outside world. The patriarchal social structures associated with the old regime which are resisted by younger men in post-revolutionary fiction denote an emerging mode of representation in which male oppression is based on age. It is no surprise then that in *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* there are few men over the age of thirty-five serving on the front-line and that the rejection of older male figures is a by-product of rejecting pre-revolutionary social values.

Like his Iraqi counterpart, Ijayel in *Al-Fatīt al-Muba’thar*, Naser’s father becomes a metaphor for the necessary decline of older men. The patriarchal association with authoritarianism and backwardness has broader social implications in these texts. Whilst Qasim and Naser’s fathers occupy different attitudes towards the war, they are both married to the tenets of the old or incumbent regime, and as such reaffirm the moral certitude and the rights of younger more powerful men. As such the younger male protagonists in both these novels firmly resist not just the institutional authoritarian routes of patriarchal power, but also the male subjects who show it deference. This resistance to military hierarchy, and patriarchal models of power reaches a violent conclusion in Davud Ghaffarzadegan’s *Fal-i Khun* when the imposition of elite values leads to the death of all three characters.

### 4.4: Davud Ghaffarzadegan: *Fal-i Khun* (A Fortune Told in Blood)

The struggle against patriarchy, and its traditional and oppressive modes of practice, reaches new heights in a *Fal-i Khun* (Fortune Told in Blood), as the struggle between the older and the younger man is amplified into an even broader rejection of patriarchal privilege. In broad strokes *Fal-i Khun* is a tale which rejects military hierarchy and class privilege by framing them as the ingredients which are responsible for creating unstable male relations. As the novel proceeds we witness the failure of
fraternal bonds and the maintenance of old ties to class and military rank leading to the death of all three male characters. Although this is a combat novel, its focus is not on fighting, but on the relationship between two characters, as the greatest enemy they each face turns out to be other. Set on a lonely mountaintop, the story is told from the perspective of the lower-class Iraqi conscript, who along with his lieutenant is ordered to keep watch over the plains below and report co-ordinates for aerial attacks. Upon the arrival of the third character, the second lieutenant, a higher ranking officer from the Republican Guard, ‘a violent confrontation ensues-one that pits the principles of humanity against what is presented as the call of duty.’

Ghaffarzadegan’s novel is unusual not solely because it is a Persian novel told from the perspective of an Iraqi conscript but also because it chooses to humanise the Iraqi enemy. As such, the reception of the novel was predictably mixed. However, for many readers Davud Ghaffarzadegan offers a refreshing take on an eight-year conflict whose consequences are still being felt today. To some extent Ghaffarzadegan’s lack of military credentials has allowed him to offer new perspectives on the war. Unlike other novelists, who were veterans of the conflict, he was not expected to adhere to a populist narrative of the war. As Ghanoonparvar observes,

> Given that Ghaffarzadegan is not a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, to some extent his book was disregarded by the first group of critics, while praised by readers in the second camp, and it went through a second printing in less than a year.

As has been mentioned above, Ghaffarzadegan’s tells his story from the perspective of the lower-class Iraqi conscript who has been ordered to accompany a superior officer on observation duty. As they ascend the mountain, which provides them with clear views over the Iranian frontier, they are able to observe the shelling of the co-ordinates they have called in. As the two men explore their relationship with each other, with the distant Iranian tribesmen on the plains below, and with the isolated world that surrounds them, their fates change irrevocably. Outside the strict confines of military structures, the lines begin to blur and the lower-class Iraqi conscript begins to question the strictly hierarchical nature of his relationship with the lieutenant. This burgeoning

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* Ghanoonparvar, p. xv
resistance by the Iraqi conscript, ranked as a warrant officer, exposes the instability of male relationships underpinned by the imposition of elite hierarchy.

The lieutenant’s superior rank and social class establishes his role as an object to be resisted, especially as his superiority is based on his social class, rather than his physical ability or military prowess. The warrant officer by his own admission has never been on familiar terms with a superior officer and upon closer inspection the lieutenant is an unimpressive figure: ‘The lieutenant had dainty facial features and a thin neck. He was surprised at how someone this frail and scrawny should now be in the middle of battle.’ However, despite the lieutenant’s physical inadequacies, he shows surprising stamina when climbing the mountain. Accordingly, from the very start of the novel, from the moment when both characters ascend the mountain, the subjugation of the warrant officer also commences.

He felt this ears burn with embarrassment but he saw that the he was not close enough to the Lieutenant for him to be able to see his scarlet face. He signalled him to go on ahead and then calmly crept forward. He bent shifting his weight forward. How scared he was of falling. His fear was disproportionate and unnatural, because the Lieutenant who seemed to come from the lap of luxury was climbing the mountain easily and nimbly. He stopped to take a breath and once again started whistling.

Whilst the warrant officer is comfortable with the close connection between military rank, class and education, his conception of his own masculinity is, by contrast, tightly bound with his physical capabilities and derived from the perceived toughness of his class status. The warrant officer believes that his hard upbringing will at least guarantee that he is stronger and braver than his military superior. A fear of inadequacy follows the warrant officer through the novel as he struggles to maintain a balance of power between himself and the lieutenant.

Though initially friendly, as time passes the relationship between the men deteriorates, a process which is intensified when the warrant officer questions the honour of fighting a war from the vantage point of the side of the mountaintop, and shelling innocent tribes-people on the plain below. Referring back to an earlier conversation in which

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41 Ghaffarzadehgan, p. 6
42 Ghaffarzadehgan, p. 8
43 Ghaffarzadehgan, p. 13
the pair used Chinese fortune-telling book to predict the manner of their deaths, the lieutenant warns that he can see his fate. He tells the warrant officer that he will be made to appear before ‘a field court-martial for the crime of treason against the homeland.’ The lieutenant’s knowledge of the law and his intellectual superiority causes the warrant officer to regret giving the lieutenant insight into his character. Once the warrant officer has revealed that he has looted corpses, he realises that he has empowered the lieutenant by giving him an insight into behaviour that could be used against him. The breakdown of the relationship is further expedited by the arrival of a third character, a character who is instrumental in upsetting the men’s already fragile relationship.

The arrival of a higher ranking officer signals a seismic shift in the power relationships between the men on the mountainside. The second lieutenant, a member of the Republican Guard, has been sent by the Iraqi forces below to check up on the two men. The lieutenant who has been sending fake co-ordinates to base, in order to appease his command, is the first to realise that once the second lieutenant has arrived he will observe that they have failed to report the position of a large group of Iranian herdsmen.

Do you think that when he sees them that he won’t say anything? I am well acquainted with these party members. The first thing he will do is report to base, then we will have to deal with the Army Information Unit and interrogation...or perhaps even worse places..."

With the impending arrival of the Ba’ath party member, the dynamic between the lieutenant and the warrant officer changes. The lieutenant immediately moves to reassert his dominance over the conscript by undermining his status and his masculinity. As the lieutenant tries to shave his beard in cold water he tells the warrant officer that: ‘you are lucky that you can't grow a beard.” Even though the warrant officer is offended by the patronising remark, he does not say anything and instead tries to ask the lieutenant what they will do when the officer from the Republican Guard arrives, makes some suggestions as to the excuses that they can offer and asks
him what they should do. However, the lieutenant rejects the idea that they are equally accountable. He simply tells him that:

“You don’t have to do anything. I am your superior. I am the one that must be answerable.” He pointed at the snowman, “and also get rid of this scarecrow in front of the bunker. I don’t want to give him an excuse.” He had found himself subservient to the Lieutenant. He brought the spade and in one movement cut off the head of the snowman."

The isolated mountaintop had allowed the warrant officer to explore less rigid and more equitable relations with his superior officer. However, the arrival of the second lieutenant soon reverses the gains made by the warrant officer in this relationship. The lieutenant uses his superior position in conjunction with militarised formulations of masculinity to subjugate the warrant officer. The lieutenant’s jibe that the warrant officer is unable to grow a beard, and has little to no responsibility, much less accountability for his actions, reduces the warrant officer to a position usually occupied by the feminine in patriarchal arrangements. The warrant officer’s inferior social status articulates an arrangement in which he is the lowest member of the male pecking order formulated through entrenched military hierarchy; a hierarchy which assumes a hegemonic patriarchal structure rather than fraternal one.

Once the Republican Guard second lieutenant arrives, an acrimonious power struggle is played out on the mountaintop: military rank is set against party loyalty. Though officially the second lieutenant occupies an inferior rank to the lieutenant, he is not a draftee or part of the formal army, but a member of an elite unit loyal to the authoritarian regime, and, as such, he holds higher status than the other two men. In comparison with the lieutenant who leaps up the rocky slopes as nimbly as a mountain goat, the second lieutenant ploughs his way up the side of the mountainside like a wolf. The confrontation between the two men is given bestial form as the endurance of the mountain goat is pitted against the savagery of the wolf. The Republican Guard immediately questions the two soldiers about their conduct, and its reflection on their loyalty to their country. Assured of his own superior education and knowledge of the law, the lieutenant attempts to use military hierarchy to resolve the confrontation: “Apparently you have forgotten that you are talking to a superior officer.” “I do not

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44 Ghaffarzadegan, p.60
40 Ghaffarzadegan, p. 60
respect anyone who betrays the homeland.” Instead, however, this only exacerbates the situation as the power struggle between the two men becomes increasingly more acrimonious. The uncertain categories that govern the power struggle between the second lieutenant and the lieutenant are shown to be an increasingly unrealistic method through which to organise relations between men in wartime. In contrast with the equal and close knit fraternal relations depicted in Ahmad Dehqan’s *Safar bah Garay 270 Darajah*, the source of the tragedy here is the inevitable consequence of enforcing and battling out hierarchal male dominance as opposed to fostering comradeship and brotherhood.

As the argument between the lieutenant and the second lieutenant intensifies, the second lieutenant attempts to choke the lieutenant. As they wrestle on the ground the warrant officer tries and fails to break up the fight and reaches for a rifle, and shoots the second lieutenant several times in the face. It is particularly noteworthy that after the death of the second lieutenant, both remaining characters freely recognise that masculinity was at the heart of the tragedy:

“It was all your fault! Why did you behave like that towards him? You were boasting about your rank. You wanted to show off to me...your idiotic vanity was the cause of this and what has befallen us.” “I did my job. You shouldn’t have interfered. It’s my fault that from the beginning I treated you well.” He took hold of the Lieutenant’s collar. “I won’t let you make me the scapegoat for everything that has happened.” The Lieutenant said in a wan voice, “I am not going to put everything on you, but you killed him. Not me.” He squeezed the Lieutenant’s collar tighter and shook him. “It was for your sake. You said save me. You would have died.”

The warrant officer recognises that the argument between the two superior officers was as a result of their need to assert their authority over him; the lowest ranking soldier. Whilst the lieutenant previously tried to divest the warrant officer of responsibility and accountability in order to assert his masculinity, his superior education and legal training allows him to spot the opportunity to scapegoat his subordinate. Though the warrant officer has killed the second lieutenant to save the lieutenant’s life, the surviving man tries to place the entire blame for the death of the superior officer on

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* Ghafarzadegan, p. 67
* Ghafarzadegan, p. 70
* Ghafarzadegan, p. 76-77
the warrant officer. As the lowest male figure in this hierarchical arrangement, the warrant officer resists his subjugation by the lieutenant with the only tools which are available to him. Whilst the lieutenant has at his disposal social, military and educational superiority, the warrant officer has his physicality and the rifle in his hands.

Fear and anger made him tremble from head to toe. He jumped into the bunker, and before the Lieutenant could move, he grabbed the back of his neck and pounded his head against the ammunition box. Blood gushed from the Lieutenant’s forehead as he fell down submissively, with his face to the ground... “I killed that animal for your sake.”

Realising that there will be no justice in a world governed by a class system, he attempts to protect himself, and regain his subjugated masculinity through violence. The warrant officer’s humiliation throughout the novel sees him rebel against class, rank, education, physical strength and political power.

The warrant officer’s retaliation against a hierarchical system reflects a thematic trend articulated in both *Journey Heading 270 Degrees* and another famous Iranian novel about the war by veteran Basiji Habib Ahmadzadeh entitled *Shatranj ba Mashin-e Qiamat* (Chess with the Doomsday Machine) which depicts the protagonist’s retaliation against military and patriarchal authority through the occupation of *in-between* space as he hunts for an Iraqi weapons system. The physical space that the characters occupy in both novels is a no-man’s land; it is in neither Iran nor Iraq. As such, the soldiers’ physical separation from the Iraqi army, away from official structures and hierarchy, and their lack of access to weaponry and resources allows them to reassess and restructure patterns of male relationships. In addition to this, the isolated location and the lack of resources give the two men an experience of combat akin to the enemy they are fighting. Indeed, whilst the novel humanises the plight of Iraqi soldiers, its familiar tropes and motifs make it easily transferable to both an Iranian and an Iraqi context. The isolated environment, the dislocation from their unit, and the fact they are poorly supplied make the characters easily identifiable as the product of an Iranian wartime experience. As Paul Sprachman points out in his translator’s introduction to Habib Ahmadzadeh’s collection of short stories and in his

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81 Ghaffarzadegan, p. 79
introduction to the translation of Ahmadzadeh’s acclaimed war novel *Shatranj Ba Mashin-e Qiamat* (Chess with the Doomsday Machine):

The relative lack of access to arms and materials forced Iranians to rely on their own talents and ingenuity to thwart their neighbour’s aggression as they fought a war against an enemy which has far greater technical capabilities. Ahmadzadeh refers to the military imbalance in his stories several times and speaks admiringly of his characters’ inventiveness in redressing it.

The lack of resources, which in large part determined the character of the fighting on the Iranian side, is an important aspect of how the novels portray life on the front line. *A Fortune Told in Blood*, like both Dehqan and Ahmadzadeh’s fiction, presents characters as being poorly supplied, and heavily reliant upon their faith and ingenuity. This does not necessarily mean that the main protagonists of Dehqan, Ahmadzadeh or Ghaffarzadegan’s novels are explicitly concerned with religion, but that there is a greater sense of predestination as an experience of the divine. This is similarly reflected in Ghaffarzadegan’s novel as his Iraqi protagonists are stripped of their up-to-date and highly technological equipment in order to be relocated to Iranian space. The transference of the Iraqi protagonists into Iranian space allows them to be exposed to the humanity of their enemy. The distant tribes-people inspire the warrant officer’s growing interest in the enemy, and encourages him to reflect on his past encounters with them. He both admires and wonders at the behaviour of the Basijis, who he sees as alien to himself:

“They are strange people.” The Lieutenant raised his head and looked at the turquoise ring. They calmly place themselves in the line of fire. The Lieutenant sneered, “because they are children.” “They might be children, but they are strange children. Not like us and our childhoods.” “Everything under the sky is the same.” “I still don’t believe it. There were two kids. Thirteen or fourteen years old.” The Lieutenant raised his head: “Who?” “Bandannas tied round their foreheads. We could see them clearly. We could have put one our bullets right between their eyebrows. The Lieutenant said, “What are you talking about?” “You would not believe that they had come all the way to carry back the calf. “I don’t understand what you are talking about.” “He looked into the Lieutenant’s eyes. We were behind the embankment. A cow had fallen and the wind carried its moos. It groaned like a human in pain. A piece of shrapnel had sliced off its leg.” “Well these things happen.” “No, we thought they had come to give it mercy. One of them was sat on its neck, stroking the cow. At that moment we

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Habib Ahmadzadeh, *Shatranj ba Mashin-e Qiamat*, (Chess with the Doomsday Machine), (Tehran, Sureh Mehr, 2008)

Sprachman, (2010), p. xi
understood that the cow was in labour. My comrade was a country boy. I wanted to shoot them but I didn’t. He said that it was ignoble. That if I did it wasn’t human...My comrade abused everything in time and space. They were no more than two children; dark skinned in red bandannas. They came to save the calf in the middle of the battle.”

Ghaffarzadegan’s simple style demonstrates to Iranians why they are both admired and misunderstood by their Iraqi enemies. The story that the warrant officer tells the lieutenant about the Iranian children displays not only the extraordinary compassion that the Iranian child soldiers have for every life, no matter how insignificant, but it also surrounds them with an aura of mystery and pastoral idealism. Unlike the father-figure, who is grounded in the rational and therefore impervious to the supernatural, the child soldiers have an affinity with nature and an almost supernatural presence accompanied by a higher morality. Their affinity with animals and nature in wartime intrigues the warrant officer and it establishes them as children of nature, enigmatic figures with mysterious motivations. The representation of the two Iranian boys as distinct from other children, and who are alien to an Iraqi concept of childhood, does much to explain the misunderstanding between the two sides. The Iranian children are linked to an other-worldly spiritual ideal; an ideal which is understood differently by the two soldiers and indicates their connection and separation from the realm of spirituality. The upper-class lieutenant is extremely sceptical and unimpressed by the tale. As such it comes as no surprise that he is presented as disconnected from the spiritual depths available to combatants during wartime. Unlike the warrant officer, who is deeply moved and intrigued by their actions and who is deeply superstitious, the lieutenant ignores the warnings sent to him by the Chinese fortune-telling book which reveals their fate on the mountainside. Though the lieutenant is the one to suggest that they pass the time telling their fortunes, it is clear that he only engages in the activity for his own amusement, and that through his scorn for the Iranian children he rejects spirituality as a mode of existence in order to deny the inevitability of death.” By contrast, the warrant officer’s experience of war becomes more supernatural the closer he draws to Iranian space, and unlike the lieutenant, he develops a hypersensitivity to the future and the fate that could await him. When he is read his fortune by the lieutenant, divined from the Chinese fortune-telling book, he doesn’t understand its meaning at first:

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“ Ghaffarzadegan, p. 40-41
“ Ghaffarzadegan, p. 47
“I found it. Listen: Fire on the mountain-distance and separation. This is the destiny of the traveller. Two men searching for shelter under the branches and leaves of a big tree. The camp fire of migrants can be seen in the distance. Tomorrow it will not be there.”

However, it soon becomes clear that the book has painted a clear picture of what he needs to do in order to achieve autonomy over his death. Despite Ghaffarzadegan’s novel being written from the point of view of an Iraqi soldier, this sensitivity, typical of Iranian fiction, to predestination is a pervasive motif within the narrative. The novel is dominated by a sense of foreboding, knowing that fate is defined by its preoccupation with death. He does not ask the book about the trivialities of love and everyday drama but instead sees it as an opportunity to gain an insight in his fate so that he can take control of his own death. The warrant officer links his fate to a nearby tree, if one is destroyed then the other shall be destroyed also. ‘My tree! And a strange feeling came over him. He said: If this tree falls on day then I will also be one of the fallen. Our fates are blended together. If I fall then it will also fall....’

The emphasis which the warrant officer places on taking control of his own death leads him to kill the lieutenant, who he knows has the intelligence and the education to outwit him in the court of law.

He was trying to make contact. It crossed his mind the perhaps the issue was not as simple as all that. He put the receiver down. The Lieutenant was shrewder and more articulate that he was; Even if it was for the sake of his eighteen year old. He certainly already had a plan. He knew the secrets of the trade and unquestionably understood the ambiguous language of the law better than he did....The Lieutenant was standing motionless with a cigarette between his lips. He released the safety catch. Knelt down on the ground and took aim at the lit end of the cigarette. When he rose the Lieutenant had been swallowed into the darkness of the abyss.

He is aware that the lieutenant is a student of law and has been brought up in ‘the lap of luxury,’’ and thus will have social advantages that he does not have. Just as the Engineer tries to use his education in *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* to master the Basiji, the lieutenant in *Fortune Told in Blood* also tries to use his education to protect a position of assumed superiority. It is important to note that both these attempts to maintain power through superior education and class fail. It is only

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* Ghaffarzadegan, p. 45
* Ghaffarzadegan, p. 10
* Ghaffarzadegan, p. 28-29
* Ghaffarzadegan, p. 82-83
* Ghaffarzadegan, p. 13
through a perception of equality, fraternity and love that fraternal, idealised masculinity is allowed to flourish in times of war. When one man tries to assert dominance over the other, particularly using social means rather than physical skills, a bitter power struggle ensues. The warrant officer is aware that in order to be able to choose the manner of his death, and escape being sacrificed to the lieutenant’s scheming to emasculate and scapegoat him, he must kill the lieutenant. If he allows the lieutenant to live he will face death by firing squad. Instead, he calls in the co-ordinates of the tree as an enemy position and then takes shelter under it. The sense of foreboding and heightened sensitivity to the future has an important role in defining the warrant officer’s fortune and is clearly linked back to the title of the work. Despite the tragedy that has befallen the men on this isolated mountainside, the warrant officer has managed to regain his power and authority, guided by fate. The threat of humiliation that has been hanging over him throughout the novel is finally resolved.

The rejection of and resistance to humiliation by upper-class characters is an important part of regaining and reaffirming a new framework of hegemonic masculinity within this literary context. The murder of the second lieutenant whilst being in direct contravention to state-directed military interests reformulates hegemonic masculinity. Once the lieutenant is dead the conscript feels that he can no longer be subjugated. Once he sees the bodies at the bottom of the cliff all his fears and anxieties are assuaged. ‘Now the precipice was under his foot; with no one to humiliate him. And the Second Lieutenant and the Lieutenant were lying below, comfortable and pain free.’ The source of conflict which is resolved through murder is ultimately played out away from society but is entirely informed by it, despite its geographical dislocation. The lieutenant’s insistence upon trying to maintain authority and tyranny over the warrant officer is revealed to be the sole reason for his demise. When his own fortune is revealed to him by the book, it depicts his grip on outmoded masculinity as:


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Ghaffarzadegan, p. 87
so cold here that one couldn’t find an insect….Up until now who has been able to see the future?"

Whilst the lieutenant quickly dismisses the fortune revealed to him, it illuminates the path to his own demise. The fate read to him is seemingly inscrutable and vague until it is contextualised with his own hierarchical concept of masculinity. The unequal distribution of power between the men is ultimately the source of this conflict in this novel. In this way, there is a sense of inevitability inherent within the novel which identifies hierarchy as a destructive force for male relations.

Despite the warrant officer being “the last man standing” and having successfully resisted the humiliation enacted against him by the lieutenant and second lieutenant, his actions are insupportable in a military environment. The soldiers’ lack of fraternity in their fight for hierarchical dominance, and the warrant officer’s killing of his fellow combatants, means that the novel can only traverse a long a single trajectory of self-punishment. The novel ends with the warrant officer bringing about his own death by giving his co-ordinates on the mountainside as a position held by the enemy. His lack of fraternity causes him to cast himself as his own judge, jury and executioner. His disobedience, enacted to defend his masculinity, means that he has failed the army and nation-state that he has been fighting for. As a result he has become the “enemy.”

Both Safar bah Garay 270 Darajah and Fab-i Khun privilege and warn against the patriarchal oppression of masculinity by other men. The Iranian Basijis in Dehqan’s novel disobey military hierarchy with impunity, protected by their fraternal masculinity that allows them to flourish on the frontline, and to survive the battlefield. For Ghaffarzadegan, on the other hand, the enforcement of military hierarchy and the oppression of homosocial opportunities lead to the inevitable death of his characters. Though the warrant officer is able to resist oppression, it is only through violence and death which he can regain control over his masculinity.

All of the novels examined in this chapter both imbibe and reject official narratives of idealised masculinity, and this articulates a specific mode of literary representation which comments on the state of the nation. Whilst the soldiers in the Iranian novels are presented as innocent virgins in order to boost their credentials as worthy defenders of the nation, the male civilians in the Iraqi novels cite and act out

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Ghaffarzadegan, p. 48
heterosexuality in order to highlight the deviance of the state. The male characters in all these novels link their sexuality to the teleology of the nation, in which a fraternal masculinity that contests patriarchy lies at the heart of national success.

Whilst later novels view patriarchy as an adversary to successful, fraternal and hegemonic male relations, texts in the earlier chapter view patriarchal decline as a wider indicator of national decay. Nevertheless, despite the divergent meanings which are attributed to the allegorical trope of the patriarchal figure, younger men are always indicative of hope for a better future; an idealised model through which male hegemony should be imbribed and legitimised. Accordingly, narratives of masculinities are essential in the construction of political critique. As opposed to the earlier novels, discussed in the previous chapter, which view the decline of patriarchy as a marker for wider national decline by imposing impotence, death and absence on the patriarchal figure, the novels in chapter 4 transform patriarchy into a site of deep contestation for younger men. What is clear then from all eight of these texts is the importance of masculinity in determining the novels’ thematic concerns. It is particularly in the embodiment of the patriarch that the reader receives cues regarding the state of play within the nation itself. Just as external factors such as censorship and government narratives influence the style and language used in the texts, the confused and oppressive condition of war is clearly reflected in the textual representations of masculinities. The decline of the patriarch, whether it is used to indicate the failure of society by its absence or its presence, is indelibly linked to the empowerment of younger male characters and their resistance to social forces who would obstruct their abilities to carry out masculine, and therefore national, goals.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1: THEMATIC OVERVIEW

The Iran-Iraq War ended on 3 August 1988, but its implications and its legacy for the two main protagonists moved far beyond the realm of political manoeuvres and military strategies. For the citizens of Iran and Iraq the conflict left a bloody and painful legacy, a legacy which did not end with the implementation of UN resolution 598. The war’s encroachment into public space and its enduring after-effects, particularly how the conflict is viewed as part of national identity and cultural life, was what compelled this research into these unchartered waters. The representational war which has been played out in the realm of fiction and public space assumed an important role in the attempt to cultivate ideal citizens under two highly ideological regimes. However, despite the public rituals, use of religion and the appropriation of physical, often municipal space, by government rhetoric- cultural narratives are not formed on a one-way street. Despite the dogmatic nature of both the Ba’athist regime and the Islamic Republic, it is not possible to think of cultural production simply and solely in terms of the imposition of elite values onto each country’s populations without any interaction from their supposed subjects. Indeed, the diverse and numerous narratives which have emerged about the war from both cultures, gesture towards the existence of self-representation beyond official cultural output from government publishing houses. The war and its effects have had an imaginative afterlife, not just in fiction, but through the mediums of film, documentary, biography and memoir, all of which bear witness to the changing interactions between representation and political dogma. Moreover, it is this realm of representation which demands to be viewed through a gendered lens. As so many scholars have asserted, war is an inherently gendering and gendered activity and one which needs to be scrutinised in order to be truly understood. It is not only a matter of how the nature of conflict is represented, but, more importantly, how citizens position themselves in relation to it.

Consequently, this study moves beyond viewing representations of gender as a simple male-female dichotomy, thereby reneging on a habit which pervades approaches to gender in the study of Middle Eastern literature. Hence, instead of reading
masculinities in this corpus of fiction as simply another reflection on Middle Eastern patriarchy, this study introduces a new approach to the study of masculinities in Middle Eastern war literature. The aim and one of the successes of this study is the insistence in restoring diversity to not just gender, but also to nation, and its relationship to the state. The shifting and transformative relations between gender, the state and the nation in literature have an important part to play in representing the war, and it is particularly through masculinities, and how they are diversely positioned in relation to the state, that we see emerge the most incisive critiques of statehood. As different masculinities are orientated to critique or condone the actions of the state, men nearly always form the constituent parts of an allegory from which can be drawn into a wider national application. Therefore, the realm of representation which these male characters occupy carries a weighty significance for the nations that they purport to represent. It is not just the role of gender and nation which this study attempts to nuance, diversify and problematize, but also the corpus of literature itself. Iran-Iraq War fiction is not simply the product of government narratives, nor is it simply a tool for critique. It is a product of context, even if it is not always a product of politics. Moreover, in employing Massad’s assertion that ‘fictional writing provides accounts of society that no other mode of representation has been able to provide...[and that] such writings [...] reveal more about reigning ideas in society than they do about the actual reality they purport to depict’\textsuperscript{445}, this study reveals complex linkages between literature and the state as they interweave representations of gender as the quintessential national allegory.

In bringing my analysis to a close, I want to use the remainder of the conclusion to underline and reiterate the two major themes identified by this research project, namely: My analyses of the previously unexplored body of fiction scrutinised in this study and the novel theoretical approach I employed to decode its representations of masculinities. The conclusion will then gesture towards further implications that this study has in a wider academic context.

5.2: IRAN-IRAQ WAR FICTION

This literature never gained the respect of any major literary critics, but it became a strong political tool in the 1980s for taking the place of Leftist literature, which was weakened by the

\textsuperscript{445} Massad, p. 272
Left’s failure to gain power in the Revolution. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the government relaxed its censorship and allowed some cultural diversity, the Islamic authors lost their privileged status, and this episode began to decline. Other changes in this literary episode came about because of the growth of women’s writing and the profusion of the feminist literary movement.446

Perhaps the most radical conclusion that can be drawn from my research is that there exists a canon of literature about the Iran-Iraq War which merits attention. In contrast to Kamran Talattof’s assertion that this canon of fiction has little to do with the literary and everything to do with the political, this study has shed light on a radical and subtle body of literature which occupies a spectrum of political and ideological stances. By focussing on fiction rather than memoir, biography and hagiography, this study has revealed a sub-set of literature which both interacts with, and rejects, government-sponsored narratives in both countries. As opposed to literature which served highly nationalistic and ideological goals, the selection of fiction which I have chosen to focus upon promotes its literary status before its political status, drawing attention to a genre of fiction that constitutes a wider literary canon. This disrupts the prevailing view that authors of Iran-Iraq War literature were using literature as ‘an informative medium to promote their religion as well as the state’s agenda’447; this subset on which I focus revises this perception, and provides new insight into literary production about the longest war of the twentieth century. Thus, instead of reading these novels as polarised manifestations of a pro- or anti-war rhetoric, this study has identified a nuanced spectrum of attitudes towards the state in these texts.

One of my central aims in this comparative study has been to evaluate the relationship between the state and literature. In particular I wanted to look at the role that coercion and censorship have played in the development of style and theme during a period in which both states had a strong vested interest in producing discourse that legitimised its authority. These constraints created enormous difficulty both for writing and publishing in Iran and Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s. The perception that Iran-Iraq War fiction is, and was, exclusively a tool for propaganda explains why it has been ostracised from academic analysis. This, however, has resulted in the dual banishment of Iran-Iraq War fiction; the first taking the form of state pressure and the second, intellectual disregard. Whilst a number of works, including those featured in this

446 Talattof, p. 134
447 Talattof, p. 133
study, are considered to be good literature by established writers, the stigma surrounding Iran-Iraq War literature has meant that these works have been analysed as part of other literary trends, as a means of avoiding the stigma that would come from association with government sponsored propaganda. Moreover, although it is true that the literary landscape dealing with this subject has been flooded by poor quality and blatantly ideologically motivated literature, there are still many works that are worthy of literary consideration and study. Therefore, in addition to providing a discussion that contextualises the socio-political factors which contribute to the texts understanding of the societies they seek to represent, the study also provides an account of literary production, the problems and prohibitions it encounters and the subsequent stylistic and thematic choices that were made by authors in response to these external forces of censorship and propaganda.

The production of literature has been closely associated with contemporary politics and history which impacts on both its style and its critical reception. As writers were, more often than not, an important political voice, their changing relationship with the state has had a profound effect on the style of work that they produced. As a result most Persian and Arabic literature has been embroiled in a game of cat and mouse between the writer and the state. The weighty onus placed on fiction to reproduce state ideology demonstrates the importance invested in literature by the state; yet, paradoxically, intellectual engagement and state critique has made it nearly impossible be taken seriously as a writer without engaging in politics. Furthermore, literature which is intellectually engaged and critical of the state has had to develop and evolve strategies to survive censorship, prohibition and punishment. As such, an important subject for further research is the profound effect of the state on literature. It is not just that fiction employs strategies to evade censorship, but that these strategies are now an indelible part of the unique literary styles seen in Iranian and Iraqi literature, and more widely across the Middle East. Thus this study lays the foundation for a contextual understanding of literary production in both Iran and Iraq by documenting the evolving relationship between the writer and the state and identifying a number of extra-textual factors which shape literary production. It has been demonstrated that these are important determinants of style, theme, content and schemes of

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448 Talattof, p. 80
449 The most obvious examples of this are Saddam Hussein’s novels *al-Qala’a al-Hasinah*, (The Fortified Castle) and *Zabibah wa al-Malik* (Zabibah and the King)
representation. The study has also shown, the punitive consequences for writers who failed to negotiate a compromise between authorial and political integrity.

### 5.3: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Representations of gender are a fundamental building block for fictional accounts of the nation at war. Citizens, and their role during war, is at the epicentre of vast array of narratives which circulate about nations, and it is these circulating narratives which account for the gendered construction of representations in Iran-Iraq War fiction. Whilst both regimes sought to consolidate their respective rules by cultivating certain types of citizens, these citizen “types” promoted and privileged by each regime inevitably had consequences for masculinities and for the production of hegemony. The outbreak of war meant that in both countries previous idealisations of men in non-combative contexts were replaced by a new militarised state-driven ideal of manliness. This does not necessarily translate into the universal idealisation of soldiering as the only site of production of male hegemony; it does, nevertheless, speak to a wider trend in which, despite the texts’ diverse beliefs, politics and representation of society, they are united in sharing a reliance on masculinity as a national allegory. Whilst chapter 2 seeks to contextualise and theorise the socio-political reflections of the texts, chapters 3 and 4 reveal the underlying link between the diverse array of texts, whilst maintaining their individual integrity. This underlying link demonstrates that fiction in both Iran and Iraq used representations of masculinities to depict the condition of the nation in their respective fictions. Despite their ranging attitudes and modes of representations, masculinities have been depicted as teleological by the texts in this study. Whilst the fall of the patriarch is represented as the quintessential allegory of masculinity in crisis, the rise of the fraternal soldier demonstrates new avenues of empowerment. As such, this study has argued that the fates of male characters in these texts operate as extended metaphors for society, the state and the nation at war.

It is particularly a framework of male power viewed in terms of fraternity which sheds light on the role of older men in the texts. This study has channelled the analysis of masculinities through the prism of the patriarchal figure. It has shown how attitudes towards the fall of the patriarch vary from text to text, each viewing differently the consequences of his rise or fall. This analysis, and the identification it has permitted,
has generated a revised notion of male hegemony, one which divests it of theoretical 
reliance on patriarchy as the determiner of its success. It has been shown how each text 
tries to understand and make sense of the fall of the patriarch, and the new state of 
male relations, which are a consequence of war. It is particularly in the Iraqi novels 
that the fate of the patriarch is directly linked to the degeneration of society; however, 
in many of the Iranian novels the patriarch’s conspicuous absence opens up new 
opportunities for relations and power between younger, fraternal men in wartime 
contexts. This is particularly evident in Ahmad Dehqn’s novel *Safar Bah Garay 270 
Darajah* (Journey Heading 270 Degrees), where the protagonist escapes the domestic 
realm ruled by his despotic father and gains strength and validation from his comrades 
whilst fighting on the frontline. Though Dehqan’s protagonist ultimately experiences 
social and psychological isolation when he returns to civilian life, the allure of 
brotherhood and homosocially constructed fraternity is undeniable. More importantly 
it is structured as the hegemonic, as opposed to dominant, force in the novel and 
depicted as the source of male strength and power.

This study’s main theoretical framework is derived from Connell’s refined definition 
of hegemonic masculinity, a term distinct from the concept of patriarchy. Despite this 
the term hegemonic masculinity is often used conterminously with patriarchy. As such 
this study has asserted that though patriarchy may at times intersect with notions of 
hegemonic masculinity they are not synonymous terms. The reason for this distinction 
is clear. The fiction in this study has shown that the role of the patriarch should be 
strongly contested as the predominant framework for understanding masculine power 
relations in Iran-Iraq War literature. The role of the father or lack thereof in both 
Iraqi and Iranian writings in this period is a poignant reminder that this fiction depicts 
the transition of power to younger men. For example, in the novel by Iranian writer 
Esma’il Fassih *Zanastan-i ’62* (The Winter of ’83), the author gestures towards a state 
of masculinity in crisis, a phenomenon which Fassih portrays in his novel through 
emasculation: his male characters are represented in terms of psychological 
impotence, physical disability and physical corporeal absence. This state of crisis 
which constitutes the experience of the three male characters at the heart of the story 
speaks to a number of themes addressed by this study. Firstly, the novel acknowledges 
the gap between the idealisation of death and combat and the reality in which it results. 
Secondly, the novel reveals a world governed by war in which “normal” men are
unable to succeed or attain masculine goals. Thirdly, and most importantly, it represents these moments of male crisis as indicative of the declining state of the nation. For example the reader encounters these moments of national crisis in *Zamastan-i ‘62* through the distortion of state-generated prototypes reflected in Fassih’s three main characters. In this instance, it is the sexual impotence of Jalal Aryan, the physical disability of Idris Abi Matrud, and the death of Mansur Farjam, through which the reader experiences extended national allegories of male crisis.

Therefore, the study has detached the concept of hegemonic masculinity from its reliance on patriarchy by insisting on the notion of hegemony as a shifting and mutable concept which echoes the power relations proposed by Carole Pateman. Pateman’s thesis argues for the fraternal social contract as the major organising principle in power relations between men. I draw on this in an attempt to move beyond familiar readings of masculinity in Middle Eastern studies, which often characterise masculinity as hysterical and hyper-masculinised performances of traditional structures of patriarchy. Moreover, where masculinity is reformed and renegotiated in its new hegemonic shape, it is, above all, an essentially unstable category which denies power to the idea of a core and irrefutable masculinity.

Whilst scholars have purported the idea of the eternal masculine in analyses of Iraqi and Iranian masculinities, this conceptualisation of Middle Eastern masculinity does little to nuance male experience or afford it a historical, class-based, religious or ethnic dimension. As Mai Ghossoub asserts:

>The Ba’ath regimes in Syria and Iraq congratulate themselves on the proportion of women who work as secretaries or teachers, and now have responsible posts in public institutions. All these states have their ‘Union of Women’, mass organizations that are typically relays of the ruling party—with which not the smallest conflict can ever be remembered. The political rights of women, nominally granted by the national state, are in practice a dead letter, since these are military dictatorships of one kind or another, in which the suffrage has no meaning.450

The assumption here is that if the military is the epitome of masculinity, then military dictatorships will benefit men and deprive women of their rights. This logic connects to an enduring notion of man as the monolithic oppressor—the beneficiary of male

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governance linked to a system of male privilege which can in turn be linked back uninterrupted to an earlier Islamic era. It is these assumptions of universal and ubiquitous male power in Middle Eastern contexts which this thesis has sought to destabilise. Whilst typical “male” characteristics of dominance appear within Iran-Iraq War literature, operating under this assumption does little to enable the examination of marginalized masculinities which opt out of, or have more complex responses to, war, or to nuance at times often contradictory or transformative responses by male characters.

In order to explore the shifting and transformative representations of masculinity in Iran-Iraq War fiction I linked and focussed my analysis through the framework of hegemony and fraternity asserting that in order to understand the role of masculinity in literature it is essential to treat gender as a relational category. This study also challenges common and widespread assumptions that women in various Middle Eastern contexts are forced into a “patriarchal bargain” with traditional patriarchal structures in order to gain access to power. Instead it shows that women’s access to power has not only been historically transformative, but that women are differently placed within different ethnicities, classes and societies to assume various levels of power, in a mirror image of the processes that occur in male experience. Just as all men do not have power over all women; some women have power over some men. At the very least women’s tacit support of hegemonic narratives of masculinity is a requirement for the construction and reification of normative ideals of masculinity. This is particularly the case in the modern nation-state, in which heteronormative ideals associated with masculinity require women to provide their support and approval of specific notions of normative masculinities, a process subsequently represented in fiction. That is to say, this fiction often rewrites dominant images of masculinity by reformulating the hegemonic and inscribing it on to younger men, thus obliterating and contesting the role of the patriarchal father. However, though masculinity is essential to the construction of political critique, it is not always the absence or impotence of patriarchy which is employed as a marker of national decline; on occasion patriarchy is transformed into a site of deep contestation for younger men. As such, the failure to contest patriarchy, and by implication patriarchal structures, signals a refusal to envision a new, differently structured and possibly better world. For

Kandiyoti, (1988)
example, the close textual analyses of Ahmad Dehqan’s *Safar Bah Garay 270 Darajah* (Journey Heading 270 Degrees) and Muhsin al-Ramli, author of *al-Fatīt al-Muba’thar* (Scattered Crumbs) revealed that the site of contestation was orientated around a central and tangible patriarchal figure. Whilst al-Ramli choices expose his critique of the state through the jingoistic, comic and ultimately erroneous beliefs of Ijāyel, Ahmad Dehqan’s father figure is the ultimate tyrant. The two younger male protagonists in both novels set out to evade the spheres of power belonging to their fathers and rewrite new codes of male power, even if these result in ultimately tragic consequences.

**5.4: Future Scope**

In addition to elucidating the role that war has played in structuring representations of masculinity, the study also endeavoured to perform an exegesis that explains the transformative nature of how and why representations of male relations metamorphose. The clearest indicator of this transformation is undoubtedly the nation-state becoming a central component of gendered identity. The realignment of gender relations through the restructuring the family, and the creation of new linkages between the tangible concept of a demarcated territory and the intangibility of notions such as loyalty and identity which the concept of nation inspires, renders patriarchy as a dominant theoretical framework to understand masculinity an inadequate critical tool. Consequently this study introduces the notion of fraternity or relations between men as the more appropriate tool with which to understand shifting representations of male power. Where the term patriarchy, a term readily applied to masculinities of the Middle East, often assumes the meaning of male dominance over all women, the term fraternity allows for differing levels of power not only between women and men, but also men with other men. Patriarchy, both an over-used and under-theorised, term is distinctly unsatisfactory when discussing power relations between men. It assumes an all-encompassing structure which undermines the concept of the modern nation-state and silences nuanced narratives of masculinities through the supposed all-encompassing power of maleness. Therefore, the concept of fraternity is a much more useful term when discussing male-male bonds in relation to the nation and one that has further implications for research which concerns itself with representations of gender in contemporary Middle Eastern fiction.
Looking towards further study, I contend that this canon of literature reflects all the ambiguities, contradictions and instabilities of masculinities inherent in, not only the formation of gender as part of national identity, but also state policies. With this in mind, I have analysed the texts through close studies of their male and female characters, and have brought a new methodological approach to the texts by viewing them firstly as a distinct canon of literature, and secondly as a purveyor of gendered representations which reflect the reigning ideas of each society. As such this study has recognised that sexuality has larger metaphorical undertakings for the literary text, in particular, in respect of how it views the nation through a gendered lens.

Nation, and therefore the political context of the texts’ literary production, is tethered to the gendered representations of masculinity. This is clearly outlined through a discussion of the impact of state policies on both societies, and their subsequent impact on literary representation in fiction. Therefore the study posits two contexts for the emergence of male representations in Iran-Iraq War fiction: First, that of the context of literary production, and second, the contexts for gendered representations which are then reflected in the texts. This second discussion draws out the ambiguities operating within society through legislation, and its various translations in different cultural, religious and ethnic contexts. It was important to draw out these schisms and ambiguities because they have a powerful impact upon representations of gendered subjects in the corpus of fiction. For example, whilst gender policy would seem to impact upon women, and consequently men, as a whole social group, the two separate discussions regarding gender and society in Iran and Iraq revealed specific disparities between legislation and narrative when other extraneous factors such as class, religion, ethnicity and other nebulous social statuses such as widowhood were taken into consideration. Consequently, these larger extra-textual influences impact upon representations in the text. It goes some way to explain why some male characters are disempowered, such as Jalal Aryan in Zamastan-i '62, and why some male characters are contested, like Qasim’s father Ijayel in Al-Fatū al-Mub’athar, and some female character, like Naneh Baran in Zamini Sukhtah and Maryam Jazayari in Zamastan-i ’62 thus indicating divergent experiences of homogenised politics. By nuancing attitudes towards masculinities and the construction of gender in dominant state narratives in both Iran and Iraq, the study seeks to emphasise and problematize oversimplified explanations of male power in literary narratives.
The prevalent practice in both states’ discourses of divesting some social groups of power whilst investing power and prestige in other groups has wider implications for nuanced discussions of representations of gender: these go beyond a simple male-female binary. The subsequent divides between the “actual” opportunities for power, and state narratives reveals the schism between privilege and power which gestures towards the possibility of further study. In particular, the stripping of power from the middle classes by authoritarian regimes across the Middle East would indicate that this schism between discursive privilege and state power is worthy of further investigation in other literary contexts. Within the Iranian and Iraqi context this schism between privilege and power is demonstrated in the counter-narratives developed by the oppressed intelligentsia, counter-narratives articulated in terms of gender. As the state appropriated and reformulated codes of normative and idealised masculinity to serve its own ideological image, the intelligentsia (and by implication writers), in their search to undermine state dominance, wielded their dissent through counter-narratives of masculinity.

As a result, counter-narratives show partiality towards conveying Iranian and Iraqi masculinities in a state of crisis or transformation; this is a vehicle to condone or critique state power. This, however, does not manifest itself simplistically. Despite the divide between the status-quo and its opposition, literary narratives cannot easily be categorised into two polarised camps. This can be seen in the fact that whilst all eight texts offer significantly different perspectives, narrative styles, themes and foci, they simultaneously share common ground: they are linked together by a preoccupation with masculinity, and what it means to be a man in wartime. These novels act as a riposte to claims that they present hyper-masculinised and hyper-sexualised accounts of war in which women exist as ‘Spartan mother, castrating wife or erotic fantasy and men at the front are heroes -in-the-making,’452; they demolish popular preconceptions of war fiction. Of course, there are war novels which subscribe to these patterns of representation, but what this study has shown is the diversity of this canon of fiction. The rejection of the war by many of the novels is not necessarily explicit or even definitive; it is, however, nuanced. As such, it is easy to understand why these subtle voices go unheard amidst the clamour of government propaganda.

This study has provided unprecedented insight into Iran-Iraq War fiction, its construction and preoccupations, and demonstrated the fluidity of its style, plot and content. Whilst each text shows differing preoccupations in its thematic focus, for example, the state, the lives of civilians etc., texts from both countries use masculinity to frame these preoccupations. Masculinities in these texts are inherently teleological. They form the framework of narratives which condone, critique, and dissent, and despite the differing modes of writing and the different intended audiences, an analysis of literary men and masculinities provides insight into the fluidity of representations, and aids an understanding of the relationship between the state and literature; this insight and understanding could and should be investigated in other comparative contexts.

This study is not simply a textual analysis; it is also a contextual analysis. The research has addressed an area not previously scrutinised and has shed light upon both popular narratives and literary responses through the medium of male sexuality and masculinity. It has achieved this through the meticulous application of an understanding of masculinity which goes far beyond simplified modes of male power. Instead, it emphasises and diversifies the numerous external factors, such as ethnicity, class, politics and religion, which are responsible for representations of masculinities in Iran-Iraq War fiction.
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