



Mercredi 3 juillet 2019 - Deuxième session (13h - 15h)

Atelier 30
Salle : 02

Death and strategies of survival in contemporary Iraqi literature

Is the eternal Iraqi mourning a reality or a myth?

During the last decades, death appears as a connecting thread in the country's deteriorating life characterised by the devastating consequences of wars, economic sanctions, foreign military interventions and ethnical conflicts.

Contemporary Iraqi literature in its various genres abounds in descriptions of death from the very symbolic images of loss and dying to the realistic scenes of grief, mourning and physical suffering. A number of works have recently focused on the human body and put forward corpses and mortal remains. In these works where death is the main character of the narrative, its representation is often crude, cynical or even ironic.

Attempts of survival and carrying on with life have on the other hand appeared as a natural reaction to death. They have also been represented explicitly or referred to indirectly. In works depicting funeral rituals and acts of remembering for instance death has been associated with themes of living memory and keeping alive national identity. It has been either venerated and honoured or reified. One may wonder if the abundance of Iraqi literature that registers or brings back images of death is not an act of survival by itself?

This workshop aims to discuss how contemporary Iraqi literature in its different genres has reflected death and strategies of survival.

Responsable : Tania Al Saadi (Stockholm University)

Liste des intervenants : Tania Al Saadi, Ada Barbaro, Mariangela Masullo, Stephan Milich, Fatima Sai

Tania Al Saadi (Stockholm University)

Borders and Bodies in the Novel al-Maštūr (2017) by Ḍiyā' Ğbelī

Borders, boundaries, confines, separating lines and divisions are common topics and images in contemporary Iraqi literature. They have not only referred to the ethnical conflicts and to the fragmented society. Fleeing and crossing the borders have definitely become one of the few options of survival for many Iraqis. In this process, whereas real or imaginary, a strong relation has been depicted in various ways between the human body and the borders.

In the novel *al-Maštūr: sitt tarā'iq ġayr šar'iyya li-iġtiyāz al-ḥudūd naḥwa Baġdād (The Cloven: six illegal ways to cross the borders to Bagdad)* (2017) by Ḍiyā' Ğbelī, an Iraqi man after a barbarian death that has divided him in two halves, attempts in a long and perilous journey to reach Bagdad in order to be able to stick back his two parts and become one again. In this paper, I discuss the themes of boundaries, crossing the borders, death and survival among others, that appear on different levels of the narrative.

Ada Barbaro (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

Between "Past" and Future : The Iraqi "Monsters" as a Counter-Narration of the Historical Milieu

New voices coming from different countries are nowadays playing an important role in the Arab cultural scene, inaugurating a process that, starting by the end of the 20th century, in some ways, is still ongoing. We are witnesses of the emergence of some publications that, fluctuating among more or less canonised genres, are building the path to hybrid writings (Barbaro, 2018), leading to a reformulation of the concept of *Adab* (literature) itself (Pellat,

1964; El Ariss, 2012; 2013). Overcoming the problem of labelling, they sometimes reinvent ancestral topoi and allow us to codify history and thus propose a reinterpretation of the (recent) past in order to reconstruct the future. In this literary milieu, some Iraqi writers are proposing an anatomy, or perhaps an “autopsy” of what remains of their-own society especially after the collapse of the previous regime. This paper will focus on some narrative publications signed by Iraqi writers who, as skilful surgeons, are nowadays trying to decompose reality, starting by a de-construction of the human being himself, and thus suggesting contemporary or futuristic visions of their society. The literary Iraqi scene offers publications that, fluctuating among fantasy, horror, science fiction, gothic and so on, sometimes propose a reinterpretation of the what al-Ariss (2016) notes as the emergence of the so-called theme of *tawahhush* (becoming wild, beastly). Iraq presents some of the best examples of narrative writings useful for an anatomy of society through the pattern of “cruel” descriptions of the present (see Antoon, 2013; Saadawi, 2013; Blasim, 2012), intermingled with apocalyptic visions of a future (Blasim, ed. 2016), dominated by various kinds of “monsters”. These publications are, for instance, differently full of images of death and stacks of corpses, that can be conceived as reifications of new monsters. Whilst those set in the present or in the recent past try to suggest an alternative vision about history; those set in the future led right through to dystopian premonitions of parallel futures.

Mariangela Masullo (University of Macerata)

Literary devices to face death: symbols and metaphors in Iraqi women's poetry

Iraq's contemporary literature is shaped by the tempestuous history of the country. Women poets add another dimension to Iraqi intellectuals' collective reflection, giving voice to the weakest segments of society. Amal al-Jubūrī (1967), Dunya Mīkhā'il (1965), May Muẓaffar (1940), and Bushrā al-Bustānī (1950) build a fragmented representation in verses of the daily struggle with death and destruction. Through the dramatis personae of young women, spouses, widows and mothers, they elaborate the consequences of decades of war, stressing the tension between the constant exposition to death and a vital instinct.

This paper aims to analyse the literary and stylistic devices used by women poets to represent death and life, often from a gendered perspective. Particular attention will be given to the references to the mourning of the dead, which on the one hand evokes a peculiar role of women in traditional Arab societies, and on the other hand is reshaped through irony and sarcasm. References to motherhood will also be explored, focusing on its reification through the lens of death, leading to a symbolic overturning of the role of the mother, both from a historical and a literary perspective

Stephan Milich (University of Cologne)

Working through the Iraqi Past: A late novel by 'Abd as-Sattār Nāṣir (1946-2013)

Like in the case of many other Iraqi writers, the fall of the regime in 2003 has created spaces for a literary writing that confronts and aims to work through the violent history of the country and the personal past of the author. Having written a critical short story (“Sayyidunā al-khalīfa”) in the 1970 that caused him detainment in isolation, the Iraqi prose writer ‘Abd as-Sattār Nāṣir saw himself forced to write a number of regime-supporting novels, especially in year three of the Iraqi-Iranian war, with his novel *Ash-shams 'Irāqīya* (The Sun is Iraqi, 1983).

One of his texts that attempt to cope with and try to work through the past retrospectively is his novel *Qushūr al-Badhinjān* (Skin of the Eggplant), written in Amman and published in 2007, a few years before his last exile to Canada. Staging an encounter between a former torturer and his victim, the narrator, the text engages in a reflection on the dynamics of the time after dictatorship – in a state of extreme insecurity due to the rise of sectarian violence and terrorism. I will discuss the novel not only by highlighting the images of recurrent death that can be found in it, but also by questioning critically the way the author deals with his (country's) past.

Fatima Sai (University of Bari Aldo Moro)

Novel is a wake. Necropolitics of Iraqi literature

The state of exception affecting the Arab world, suspending the daily living habits, the political and juridical order, does not seem to end. Violence of every sort led to a state of anomy where even the limits of representation have been broken down. In times where obscenity becomes the norm, fictional literature seems to undertake an act of *pietas*, retrieving a role in a scattered community.

As Nouri Gana writes : “Because of the increasing institutionalization of warfare and the decline of communitywide mourning

practices, the literary has become the most hospitable public space where the performance of memory and mourning takes place". The Iraqi literary scene of the past years is a funeral wake with a corpse at its very centre. As the trauma is not concluded, it is not possible to discard it, but it is old enough to start to be transformed. The mourned flesh is no longer an immobile entity, is a transforming one.

The narratives of Ahmad Saadawi, Sinan Antoon and Hassan Blasim, in particular, are full of dead bodies which are observed in their graphicness, manipulated, reassembled, fetishized, mourned, buried. They speak and symbolize, comfort and terrify, haunt the imagery and the aesthetics.

Changing yet not alive, dead yet speaking, they are both active and acted, overcoming the dichotomy subject/object. This reflection proposal tries to detect a trend in the Iraqi fiction that does not seek to exorcise death, it admits it and coexists with it, even uses it as a source of creativity, developing new forms of corporeality and humanity.