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**Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present**, by Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, London and New York: Zed Books, 2007. 292 pages.

**REVIEWED BY ZAINAB AL BAHRANI**

the US-UK war against Iraq and the continuing occupation of the country has resulted in a catastrophic upheaval of Iraqi society, and the obliteration of anything resembling a normal human existence for its people. One of the most significant social changes brought about by the occupation and the interim Iraqi government is in women's legal status and their conditions of daily life. While before 2003 women's lives were oppressed under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussain, compounded by the dire constraints of the embargo, this oppression was similar to that of most other citizens of the country; it was not particularly divided along the lines of gender. Today, women have become pawns in the power plays of the different political factions in Iraq on the one hand, and in the political rhetoric of the United States on the other. The latter is a rhetoric of the liberation of Iraqi women used primarily for American consumption; the reasons most often given in the United States and the United Kingdom for the Iraq war are those of a "humanitarian intervention" to rid the people of Iraq of a brutal dictator and to free women from the burden of the *burkah* (never mind that this garment is in fact alien to the traditional dress of Iraq). As they presented it, part of Saddam's tyranny was the tyranny of the veil. Women, in other words, have now replaced the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as one of the causes for their 'just war'.

Another consequence of the war and occupation of Iraq has been a constant re-writing of historical accounts, declarations of identities in relation to the land and to history, narratives of diasporas and returns, and of individuals and groups of people. Telling the stories of Iraqi women is a way to uncover another layer of Iraq's multiple and shifting narratives, as Nadjé Al-Ali, author of *Iraqi Women*, explains in her introduction. She defines her work as an alternative history, focused on women's lives and experiences (p. 267). The author, who is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Exeter in England, sets out to provide this alternative oral history of Iraq through the voices of the women whom she presents in the book.

The book is organized as a historical narrative that begins with the early twentieth century, when Iraq was under the British mandate, before the 1958 revolution that overthrew the monarchy. The stories of a number of older women who recall that time are recounted in the first chapter, entitled "Living in the Diaspora", an indication that many of those interviewed for the earlier period left Iraq soon after the events of 1958. The following pages, as described by the title of each chapter, focus on the experiences of women living with the revolution, with the Ba'th, with the violence of internal government campaigns and internments, with international sanctions, and finally, with the violence of the US occupation of Iraq. This sub-division of chapters under the headings of 'living with' and a particular political era or situation could well be taken by the reader to mean that women are always on the margins of society, and never agents of societal, even less political, change. However, Al-Ali demonstrates her point that this is not the case through interviews with

women who were involved in women's rights organizations and NGOs, or who are humanitarian workers, or writers and bloggers who continue to speak out bravely under current conditions.

The voices of the women that Al-Ali presents in the book are intended as examples of how different women's experiences from the 1940s until today can be taken as accounts of the past. It is refreshing that the author does not define difference among the women narrators in sectarian, ethnic, or religious terms. In fact, the voices of the women seem to reveal that 'difference' before the US war and occupation was perceived by these women and their social circles primarily in terms of social class. The stories told are personal and varied, and provide an interesting narrative mosaic that holds the reader's attention, and provides insights into average people's lives.

However, a number of questions arise from the fact that the processes of the interviews are not laid out. We do not read the actual discussion between the author and the informants, because the author removes herself entirely from the interviews. Instead, Al-Ali has chosen to excerpt passages from the stories that women gave her, whether in Amman, Detroit, San Diego, or London. Al-Ali chose these locations because it was not possible for her to go to Iraq, and because these cities have large communities of Iraqis of various religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds. But she does not clarify how the interviewed women were chosen, nor how she presented the project or the interview to them. Not being told how the interviews were conducted is at times frustrating for the reader. It would have been useful to know, for example, if the author spoke to the informants in Iraqi Arabic, or in English. We can assume that Al-Ali was able to speak to them directly in the local dialect, since we are told that her father is Iraqi, but this issue is never clarified. Likewise, it is not clear if the author was able to consult primary Arabic sources, or was limited to secondary literature on Middle Eastern women, as her bibliography suggests. Given the author's interests and aims the latter approach is valid, but greater clarification would have been helpful.

On the other hand, Al-Ali's own story and family history is woven into the broader narrative of Iraqi women's lives in a way that allows the reader to see the personal aspect of all the narratives, thus moving away from the traditional historical account. The relationship between memory, history, and truth is thoughtfully problematized. But because these stories are idiosyncratic, dependent on the personal view-point of a particular narrator, they can also leave one wishing for more information. As an Iraqi woman familiar with the history of Iraq and with the lives of women there, I would have liked to read more about the start of women's movements in the 1920s, the important role of women in the establishment of the communist party, and their place in establishing hospitals and humanitarian NGOs such as the Red Crescent, both before the revolution of 1958 and right after it.

At the same time Al-Ali provides some fascinating details of the change in women's legal status brought about by the current government under the new Transitional Law and newly written Iraqi constitution. These constitute, in effect, a horrendous erosion of women's legal rights. Al-Ali points out that most women, whether living in Iraq or in exile, are simply unaware of the new laws and their ramifications.

For example, Article 41 of the new Iraqi constitution stipulates that the existing family laws be replaced by religious laws, based on the religion or ethnicity of the individual in question. In other words, the new law has deliberately sub-divided people on a religious and ethnic basis. As Al-Ali points out, the new law makes mixed marriages virtually impossible and threatens already existing ones, and will no doubt fuel more sectarian violence while at the same time constituting

a serious erosion of women's legal rights as human beings (p. 246). This last chapter, "Living with the Occupation", is the most powerful of the book. It provides moving narratives and a strong analysis of how women's lives are affected by the current violence and upheavals of war, occupation, and forced migration. The author's strongest points are that while women are agents in the processes of history, Iraqi women have also become a sign of identity and otherness, and are again becoming the targets of unspeakable violence from all sides.

Nadje Al-Ali's book is an important new work on the lives of women in Iraq and their current plight. While a number of recent books written as memoirs by (or about) particular Iraqi women exist in the English language, these have been primarily in the genre of Orientalist fiction, presenting exotic stereotypes of violence, despotism, and sexuality for the Western reader. Al-Ali's book is a welcome change from such writing, and a notable contribution to the scholarly literature in women's studies. It is a serious and thoughtful book, well written and absorbing to read. It is also a timely book that speaks out bravely about the new attacks on Iraqi women's lives and their legal rights today.

Zainab al Bahrani is the Edith Porada Professor in Ancient Near Eastern Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University in New York.

Email: [zb2101@columbia.edu](mailto:zb2101@columbia.edu)