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REMEMBERING AGAINST FORGETTING: READING *BAGHDAD DIARIES* AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

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Abstract

This research paper explores the diary as a powerful tool of resilience and resistance in the face of oppression and conflict. Through a close-reading of Nuha Al-Radi's Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile (2003), this study argues that reading and writing diaries are acts of defiance that preserve memory, thought, and identity in the face of adversity. In Iraq, where silence is often imposed and speech is policed, diaries become vessels for collective memory, sanctuaries for language, and threads of continuity that weave past, present, and future together. By examining the diary as a site of resistance, this paper highlights the ways in which individuals and communities assert their existence, refuse erasure, and preserve their stories, culture, and humanity in the face of overwhelming adversity. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the quiet act of reading and writing diaries is a profound declaration of survival and remembrance.

Keywords: *Diary, Resistance, Iraq, War, Testimony, Memory, Reading*

Introduction

Memory is the fragile thread that weaves a community's identity together, a lifeline that preserves the past and its stories. This thread is carefully woven through personal and collective narratives in diaries. Diaries are more than just personal records - they're lifelines that preserve the essence of a community's identity. By capturing the intricacies of life under siege, they offer a powerful testament to the human experience. The act of reading and

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writing diaries is a bold declaration of existence, a defiance against the forces of erasure and forgetting. Nuha al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman's Chronicle of War and Exile* (2003) is a shining example of this resilience, a counter-narrative that resists the silence imposed by conflict and occupation. Through her writing, al-Radi binds fragments of the past into a meaningful narrative, fueling hope for a future that's still being written. In the face of adversity, diaries like hers become vital tools for cultural survival, preserving the past while imagining a future that's not yet determined. Diagonally across time, her diary whispers secrets of the past, forging an invisible bond between strangers. In the fragile pages of her journal, lives are intertwined, and the threads of continuity are strengthened. Even in the face of rupture and disconnection, these threads hold fast, a testament to the enduring power of human experience.

Diary as a Literary Genre

It is hard to speak of anything so protean as diaries in a single article. The mysterious ways in which time and memory works, must have destroyed a greater part of them, with no regard to their merit. But enough have survived; so much so that the genre can compete with novels in abundance (Matthews, 286). From the Latin *diarium*, German *Tagebuch*, Russian *dnevnik* to the English term diary, all are derived from the same root, meaning 'day.' Therefore, despite the diversity in form and structure, we can agree to the fact that diary 'is committed to the calender, day after day' (Paperno, 562). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* the word diary signifies 'a daily record of events or transactions, specifically, a daily record of matters affecting the writer personally' ('Diary'). Although, the two words — 'diary' and 'journal' are often used interchangeably, the dictionary defines journal as 'a daily record of events or occurrences kept by anyone for his own use . . . usually implying something more elaborate than a diary' (qtd. in Matthews 286). In other words, a journal is a kind of document which is usually more planned, more regular in fashion, has specific objective and commonly has an audience in view (Matthews 286). Therefore, as Matthews points out, although journals are important documents for their intended readers and historians, these are

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not documents which one usually reads for pleasure. Their formal style of writing and lack of any personal touch makes them dull. On the other hand, diaries are comparatively less formal, less systematic and contains writing 'that a person does of his own free will and entirely for his own interest' (Matthews 287).

As a genre, diary situates itself in an uneasy position between the literary and the historical, the fictional and the documentary, the spontaneous and the reflective. Rachael Langford and Russell West opine:

> The diary, as an uncertain genre uneasily balanced between literary and historical writing, between the spontaneity of reportage and reflectiveness of the crafted text, between selfhood and events, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the private and the public, constantly disturbs attempts to summarize its characteristics within formalized boundaries. (qtd. in Paperno 561)

As a genre, it becomes a site where its readers engage in a continuous dialogue with history and where, with the readers' intervention, history gets reconstructed within the dated pages and chronological entries. Despite sometimes being condemned to exclusion from analysis as an independent genre, it is the richness of its themes that makes diaries unique. A historian can provide the facts of the major social events or general practices of a particular time; whereas, a diarist can help one comprehend 'the wondrous confusions of daily life' (Matthew 297). But, at the same time, we must remember that diaries are no novels to entertain the readers with 'artistically satisfactory ends' (Matthew 297) for they are 'bound to reality' (Matthew 297). Quite pertinently does Paperno state, '. . . the diary is not merely a genre, but a cultural artifact existing within a social context . . . [E]mphasis on form and genre obscures the workings of diaries as intimate writings and intimate records — an archive that situates self in history' (qtd. in Beattie 83). By providing insight into the lives of ordinary people diaries not only inform us about incidents (mundane as well as extraordinary) happening in the context of changing times and societies, but also present public issues from personal point of view, thereby providing an otherwise unobtainable understanding of

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how people used to think at a certain time or place. As Matthews points out, a diary, as a personal document, 'reflects the shifts and inconsistencies of ordinary human behaviour' (288). It mirrors the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of individuals on a particular day or moment, without being bothered about what has gone before and without any idea of what is to come next. In other words, diaries render life *in medias res*, recording life simply as it is lived.

The idea of diary as a feminine genre developed partly because, in most of the cases, it was the only literary form women were allowed to practice. As discussed earlier, a diary can be written at regular or irregular intervals; it can be kept over a long period or a short period of time. The subject matter varies widely and there are almost no rules except that it begins *in medias res*. Diaries are capable of being written at odd spare moments of one's busy schedule, or at the end of a long tiring day of one's life. Any event or non-event, considered unworthy of being commented upon or included in a so-called canonical text, finds its place in diaries and, as rightly claimed by Valerie Raoul, 'what is normally considered marginal in a man's world becomes central' in women's diaries. Hence, as a form of 'non-productive private writing' diaries were allowed to be kept by women (especially in the nineteenth century) as long as it did not 'did not interfere with the business of being a woman' (Raoul 58). Quite interestingly, the then woman's business was, precisely, to stay away from business, and therefore, not turn their own writings into marketable commodities. Hence, keeping 'private-diaries' was considered safe and harmless by the society. Quite ironically, as rightly pointed out by Raoul, in order to retain their privateness, private diaries, 'should not survive . . . yet a written record remains, until destroyed— like a message in a bottle which may evoke, years later, a barely elicited response unknown to the sender' (Raoul 58). It is quite intriguing that although throughout history more girls have kept diaries than boys, yet, more diaries by men have survived the ravages of time. Valerie Raoul has pointed out a very interesting reason for this:

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> Girls were encouraged to keep a diary only during the period of transition during which they moved from the status of child to that of wife. Once married, writing about themselves was perceived as an unjustifiable self-indulgence, a theft of time which should be more profitably spent (on others). Secrecy becomes suspect, as a wife should have no secrets from her husband. (58)

Thus, thousands of such manuscript diaries might have been destroyed by the husbands or have gone into oblivion in some dusty attic without ever having the opportunity to be read by anyone else. One such example, is the diary of Elizabeth Pepys, wife of famous diarist Samuel Pepys. Quite ironically, we come to know about her diary, only through the entry made by her husband about destroying her diary. In his January 9, 1663 diary-entry, Pepys wrote:

> I forced it from her and tore it, and withal took her other bundle of papers from her and leapt out of the bed and in my shirt clapped them into the pockets of my breeches that she might not get them from me; and having got on my stocking and breeches and gown, I pulled them out one by one and tore them all before her face, though it went against my heart to do it, she crying and desiring me not to do it. (qtd. in McKnight 91-92)

From that point on, nobody ever heard of Mrs. Pepys' diary, while Samuel Pepys got recognized as one of the most valuable diarists of the Restoration era. However, such incidents are not limited to the spouses of famous writers only, who destroyed their wives' writings considering those as potential threats to their sense of structure and identity. As pointed out by McKnight, 'many diaries are edited extensively, even destroyed, by diarists themselves or by other family members, either in an effort to protect and preserve a given image of the diarist and family or, perhaps, because the document is not seen as valuable to keep' (92). Another instance, like that of Mrs. Pepys, happened with a woman named Billie Schuneman, the great-aunt of Jennifer Sinor, writer of *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing*. She recounts:

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> And I was looking for [my diaries] one day and I asked [my husband] where they were — where was the box of my things — and he said, Oh, I took them out and burned them — said, you don't want any of that stuff — I burned it. My heart. Take your writings and it's like killing your child — I just — I looked at him and I thought who is this person? I don't know him. I've known him since he was thirteen. I didn't know he was a murderer . . . I mourned. (qtd. in McKnight 93)

However, those exceptions, which somehow managed to get published, be it during the lifetime of the writer or posthumously, are very few in number. Moreover, their being composed by the 'inferior sex'—by those who were generally prevented from attaining the ideal status of authors—lead to the marginalization of diaries from the literary canon. Robert Fothergill, in his critical text on diary, dismisses women's diaries altogether for not 'project[ing] an ego image' (qtd. in Huff 10). Cynthia Huff rightly points out:

> Fothergill's male-centered criterion for diary excellence overlooks the ways in which women render their subjectivity concrete by allowing the free flow between inner and outer, between the psyche of the writer and the dailiness of her life as she explores connectedness. (10)

Through this 'connectedness', this 'free flow between inner and outer,' women approach the world and transgress boundaries erected by men to contain them. The fluidity of women's ego boundaries, reflected in their diary writings, differentiates them from men and the fluidity of the genre enables it encompass anything as its subject—anything, which might never find a place in the canonical literary genres. This all-inclusiveness of a diary renders it 'common'—a feature that leads to its marginalization and exclusion (except in a small number of cases) from the artistic hierarchy. Probably this commonality and the marginal position bring this genre even closer to the 'second sex.' Virginia Woolf in her *A Writer's Diary* gives a very interesting illustration of a diary's nature:

> What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or

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> beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art. The main requirement, I think on re-reading my old volumes, is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, and found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time. (13)

Therefore, in Woolf's vision, a diary serves as a 'capacious hold-all,' embracing almost everything which could not fit elsewhere. In other words, as pointed out by Raoul, diaries function like inventories or 'a sort of memory bank in which one makes deposits, ensuring that nothing is lost' (61). This all-embracing nature of diaries, with the absence of strict generic rules and norms attracts the attention of women towards the genre. However, this apparent lack of selectivity regarding the subject matter and the absence of a conscious artistic endeavor in writing adds to the reasons for diary's being excluded from the 'literary canon.'

Power and Resistance

Despite the ubiquity of the word 'resistance' in social sciences, it remains loosely defined. Whether there can be or should be one single definition of this essentially 'plural, malleable and evolving' (Baaz et al. 138) phenomenon is a matter of much contention. The literal meaning (not in the strictly sociopolitical sense in which I will be using the term in my article) of the noun 'resistance,' according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is 'the act of fighting against something that is attacking you, or refusing to accept something' ('resistance'). The term 'resistance' has its root in Latin *resistere*, which means 'to make a stand against.' According to *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 'resistance' is (i) '[t]he act of resisting, opposing, withstanding etc.,' (ii) '[p]ower or capacity to resist,' (iii) '[o]pposition of some

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force . . . to another or others,' and (iv) '[a] force that retards, hinders or opposes motion . . .' (qtd. in Knowles and Linn 4). In literature, the term 'resistance' was first applied by Ghassan Kanafani—a Palestinian writer and critic—while describing Palestinian literature in his book *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*.

Power and resistance are interdependent forces that keep on shaping each other. Scholars like J.P. Sharp, P. Routledge, R. Paddson and C. Philo categorize power into two forms—'dominating power' and 'resisting power.' Dominating power 'attempts to control or coerce others, impose its will upon others, or manipulate the consent of others' (2-3), while, resisting power 'resist[s] the impositions of dominating power' (2-3). Therefore, any act, which challenges power by refusing to be dominated passively, falls within the ambit of resistance.

However, one cannot talk about hierarchy, power and resistance without mentioning Michel Foucault. For him, people who occupy the topmost strata of class structure do not have a monopoly over power. As McGee states, 'Foucault rejects the idea of power as deliberate coercion exercised by actors, and instead holds that 'power is everywhere', embedded and transmitted in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth', something which constitutes social actors rather than being wielded by them' (173). According to Foucault, the traditional concept of power, which he terms as 'juridico-discursive' (Powers 29) has three aspects:

a) Power is possession

b) Power flows downward

c) Primary function of power is repressive.

On the contrary, for Foucault, power is not an individual's possession; rather, he believes in the 'multiplicity of power relation' (92), exercised from countless points. According to Foucault:

> Power must be analyzed as something which circulates; or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never

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> localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised in a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation. (Brito et. al. 4)

Moreover, he does not approve of the traditional notion about power being something negative or regressive. He opines:

> Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 92-93).

Therefore, the Foucauldian concept of power, unlike the traditional one, seems more productive and inclined towards resistance power deployed by the less powerful to thwart the exercise of oppressive power through class, institution or state.

In the Foucauldian theoretical framework of power, three primary distinctions are made:

a) Sovereign power

b) Disciplinary power

c) Bio power

To Foucault, sovereign power is the power of law, which is 'legislative, prohibitive and censoring: a power that primarily makes use of the law and

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law-like regulations' (Lilja and Vinthagen 110). Boycotts, rebellions, strikes, revolutions, political disobedience etc. are acts of resistance through which people undermine sovereign power. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, works towards training and controlling individuals, and also punishing them if any violation occurs. Surveillance is an integral part of such power. Resistance to disciplinary power is carried out in covert and secretive ways, which James Scott terms as 'everyday resistance.' In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault sheds light on a power 'that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations' (137). This form of power, which, significantly, has a 'positive influence on life' is later designated by him as biopower. However, resistance surfaces when there happens to be an attempt at thwarting the execution of any form of power.

Renowned political philosopher and theorist, Hannah Arendt, opines in accord with Foucault's notion of power:

> Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is 'in power' we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. (qtd. in Habermas and McCarthy 4).

Therefore, according to Arendt, the existence of power depends largely on 'people,' without whose support it is impossible for a power-holder to exercise his power. Contrary to the popular notion of power flowing hierarchically from top to bottom, Arendt conceptualizes power as something, which emanates from the people at the bottom.

The interplay between power and resistance, however, is not as simple as it seems to be. Critics like Karner have brought to the fore the '*dynamic* between power and resistance' (Vinthagen and Johansson 28). There is an ever-going interaction between power (dominance) and resistance and the two keep on shaping each other. Vinthagen and Johnsson observe that though

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the interaction between these two opposing forces is an asymmetrical one, it is not always power that controls the dynamic. Though the usual tendency is 'to see resistance as a reaction to power' and thus as only secondary to power (29), critics like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that 'resistance is an original activity that acts without the consent of power' (29). Hollander and Einwohner (2004) conceptualizes the relationship between power and resistance as a cyclical one. In their model, 'domination leads to resistance, which, in turn, leads to further exercise of power, provoking further resistance and so on' (qtd. in Vinthagen and Johansson 30). But Vinthagen and Johansson proposes a spiral model instead:

> Power and resistance affect each other throughout history, in what we would instead describe as a spiral, or rather constant spiral-dynamics of actions and reactions, of innovations and counter-innovations, measures and counter-measures. (31)

Confronted with oppositions, those in power and authority devise newer ways of subjugation, control and oppression. The subjugated, on the other hand, take recourse to 'new methods and strategies' (31). It is, therefore, a matter of constant improvisations and adaptation which leads to the evolution of newer techniques on both sides.

Keeping Diary as a form of Resistance:

Forgetting is easy, but memory – fragile, disputed, and often painful – is the thread that weaves a community's identity together across disruptions. Keeping diary, serves as a vital lifeline to preserve memory, allowing us to hold onto the past and its stories. Talking of memories, one might remember Haifa Zangana's famous quote — 'for some memory becomes life itself' (xiv). This is true for most of the Iraqis who have lost their loved ones during the war and occupation. While oral traditions fade away with time, and witnesses are silenced, the written word endures, transcending generations to share experiences that might otherwise be lost. Through writing, one reclaims and preserves the narratives that shape us, ensuring that the past informs our present and future. Every Iraqi diary is a vessel of continuity, preserving

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thoughts and experiences that might otherwise be lost. Bella Brodzki makes a very interesting remark while talking of the increasing importance of testimonies at present:

> It has been said that our era is 'the age of testimony,' and that the act of bearing witness to an event . . . or establishing evidence before an actual or projected audience, is the literary or discursive mode of our time. (qtd. in Fadda-Conrey 159)

Indeed, testimonials like the one selected for this article have the ability to connect readers with the writers across borders, thereby dismantling the age-old distinctions between the private and the public. Transcending the regional and cultural boundaries, testimonials like these resist the state-imposed political amnesia by preserving the present in the memory of people. The testimonial serves (to a large extent) to dispel the myth of 'evil Arabs' disseminated by the western discourses and help humanize the Iraqis (and Arabs in general). As the war and occupation continued, differentiating one day from another became increasingly difficult. With recurring incidents of violence and oppression, weeks merged into months and the past slowly merged into the present. In such a condition, such diaries rescued these Iraqi women from drowning in the 'disorienting sense of *deja-vu*' (Fadda-Conrey 168).

More than just paper and ink, these diaries are testaments to the enduring power of human thought and experience. These written records transcend the fragility of spoken words, which can be lost to the chaos of war, the silence of oppression, or the passage of time. Diaries become repositories of memory, holding within them the stories, emotions, and reflections of those who dare to write, and offering a glimpse into the past for generations to come. In an era, when official stories are rewritten with each new regime, and when words are manipulated, distorted, or erased, Nuha al-Radi's diaries stand as resilient fragments of truth. On Day 13 of the first Gulf War, she poignantly questions:

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> Twenty-seven thousand air raids on us so far. Is the world mad? Do they not realize what they're doing? I think Bush is a criminal. This country is totally ruined. Who gives the Americans the licence to bomb at will? I could understand Kuwait doing this to us, but not the whole world. Why do they hate us so much? (21)

Although Bush kept claiming that the ultimate goal of the war was to establish peace and order, Al-Radi dismissed all such claims in her diary as all Iraqis saw around them was chaos and disorder. She also challenged the claims made by the U.S. army about precisely hitting military targets:

> They have started hitting the bridges again. Jumhuriya Bridge is now apparently in three pieces. Countless industries, textile factories, flour mills and cement plants are being hit. What do they mean when they say they are only hitting military targets? These are not military installations. As for 'our aim never goes wrong' . . . who will save us from these big bullies? (29)

Thus, her diaries defy the ephemeral nature of rhetoric and propaganda, offering a steadfast testament to the past. To read these diaries is to nourish one's soul with the authenticity of lived experience, to satiate the deep hunger for truth and memory that can otherwise leave us spiritually impoverished. In their pages, we find a profound sense of connection to the past, a reminder of the human experiences that transcend the fleeting nature of politics and power.

Although, according to Nuha al-Radi, 'in wartime . . . creative process simply dries up' (58), her diary is replete with examples of the ingenuity of Iraqi women who came up with various innovative strategies to cope up with the chaos and destruction engulfing their lives. When sustained 'military and economic aggressions . . . led to a Stone-Age level of existence' (Mehta 225), the Iraqi women were compelled to figure out some sort of solution in order to survive. On 'Day 7' of the first Gulf War, Nuha al-Radi notes in her diary the experimental preparation and preservation of meat:

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> None of us has ever made *basturma* before and we thought that it would be a good way to preserve our meat. We minced raw meat and mixed it with a lot of different spices and salt, and then stuffed the mixture into nylon stockings (in lieu of animal intestines, which were not available). (15)

The experimental preservation of raw meat during a nationwide food shortage, without electricity or refrigeration, highlights the ingenuity of women in devising vital survival tactics. Mehta, in this context, quite artistically remarks, 'the cured meat hangs from the kitchen top like a fragrant sculpture, a culinary still life that nevertheless sustains life through healthy eating' (228). Another example of their culinary ingenuity is documented by al-Radi in her 'Day 18' diary entry:

> We are saving gas by cooking and heating food in the fireplace, which seems to be smoking. Maybe something is wrong with the chimney. We are baking our own bread. The favourite way is to place the unleavened dough flat on fine wire mesh, like pitta bread, and bake it on an Aladdin stove. These old kerosene stoves have proven their worth. They are the best heaters and now the best bread-makers. (26)

Thus, the women create resistance, not only to the war-inflicted food shortage, but also to western packaged food items, which tried to take over the Iraqi market during the embargo, by their 'culinary inventiveness' (Mehta 228). Their inventiveness not only provided sustenance to the body, but also uplifted the spirit. As Mehta rightly asserts:

> Their creativity in the kitchen represents a sign of difficult times in which the body learns to adapt to its new circumstances through the iron will to preserve. . . Al-Radi's culinary creations position the kitchen as an artist's workshop that keeps cultural production alive peacefully, as a model of underground resistance. . . The cultural politics of food in the diary also bears witness to the resilience of Iraqi women who struggle to maintain the cultural and spiritual wholeness of their communities. (228)

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Apart from the shortage of food, Iraq had to deal with the scarcity of water too. Al-Radi wrote on 'Day 9' of the first Gulf War that the water situation worsened so much that people started washing their clothes in the river (18). In one of her entries, Al-Radi wrote, 'now that we are back in the Dark Ages, we have to figure out a way to haul up water from the river' (14). Even when they got a semblance of flowing water from the taps, the pressure was so low that it could not be made to fill the tanks placed on the roofs. On 'Day 12' of the war, Al-Radi wrote:

> Drew endless buckets of water up to the tank on the roof. I filled them up and Munir pulled them up with a rope, eighty buckets in all. Very hard work . . . Back to Stone Age basics. (20)

Thus, in order to cope up with the new reality characterized by a scarcity of the basic necessities of life like water, the Iraqis were left with no other option than to invent daily survival tactics and prevent themselves from succumbing to death. Thus, a diary like this becomes a lifeline, weaving together disparate lives into a rich tapestry of shared human experience. In places like Iraq, where rupture and dislocation are all too common, these threads of connection are invaluable. They provide a sense of continuity, a reminder that even when other bonds are broken, the human thread remains unbroken. Through the pages of a diary, we can touch the lives of those who came before us, and find solace in the knowledge that we are not alone in our struggles. Without diaries, each generation would be a disconnected thread, forced to start anew without the benefit of experience, wisdom, and stories from the past.

Reading as Resistance

Reading is resistance. Every act of reading is a quiet rebellion. Every page turned is a stand against forgetting, a declaration that memory matters more than the fleeting present. It's an act of continuity, a refusal to let the past be erased. Reading is an act of defiance against the forces that seek to silence, and to erase. It's a testament to the enduring power of human experience, a

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reminder that our stories, our struggles, and our triumphs are worth preserving. In Iraq, reading is an act of defiance, a deliberate stand against the forces of erasure and oblivion. It's a means of preserving the past, safeguarding memories, and resisting the slow violence of amnesia that threatens to consume identities and cultures. Every word read is a testimony of resilience; a refusal to succumb to the suffocating silence imposed by oppression and conflict. To read is to remember, to recall the stories and experiences that shape us, and to survive – not just as individuals, but as people, with their culture, history, and humanity intact.

On the early morning of February 13, 1991, precision-guided bombs of the coalition forces hit the Al-Amiriyah shelter, a civilian bomb shelter in Baghdad, causing the death of over three hundred innocent civilians. Although, mostly every news media broadcasted the incident and showed the footages of charred dead bodies being carried out of the rubble, some media-houses were largely biased towards US military, as President Bush put the blame on Saddam Hussain for all these deaths. Bush claimed that 'the coalition chose its targets carefully and had strict rules of engagement intended to avoid bombing innocent civilians' ('Crafting Tragedy') and if someone should be held responsible for the incident, then it should be Saddam Hussain as he intentionally co-located civilians and military assets to deter American military interventions. According to Bush, 'Saddam Hussein used deaths of innocent civilians to try to undermine international and domestic support for the American-led coalition, and the Iraqi regime made many claims that civilian targets had been hit by coalition air forces, with loss of innocent civilian lives' ('Crafting Tragedy'). Citing the horror of the shelter's destruction, where 'whole families were wiped out,' Nuha al-Radi questions the logicality of the U.S. President's claims of strategically placing civilians inside the 'military target' to deter their military interventions:

> An utter horror, and we don't know the worst of it yet. The Americans insist that the women and children were put there on purpose. I ask you, is that logical? One can imagine the conversation at command headquarter going something like this: 'Well, I think the Americans will

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> hit the Amiriya shelter next. Let's fill it with women and children.' What makes the Americans think they are invincible? (Al-Radi 36-37)

Recounting the events in such detail, *Baghdad Diaries* preserves the memories of the deceased, against the obliterating efforts of the mainstream western media. The incident no longer remains an event occurred in some remote past to some unknown people, but becomes a lived experience, appealing to our senses.

In a world where public spaces are often charged with tension, where conversations in streets and markets, are fraught with the weight and uncertainty and surveillance, reading a diary becomes a subversive act – a rare opportunity to step into a private sanctuary, untouched by the external world's scrutiny. Unlike public discourse, which can be policed, censored, or silenced, the act of reading is a private conversation between the reader and the text – a dialogue that's difficult to monitor or control. In the quiet depths of reading, a subtle revolution unfolds. The narrative, discussed in this article, makes the readers feel close to the writer and the events taking place around her. Keeping up with the mundane details of her life, the readers unconsciously develop a sense of intimacy with the diarist. An inner room takes shape, shielded from the world's intrusions, where the self is sovereign. This revolution does not declare its presence with grand declarations or loud slogans. Instead, it quietly constructs an inner sanctuary that remains impervious to external control – a space that cannot be invaded, censored, or occupied. Even as the external world crumbles, a reader can retreat into this inner fortress, a portable and unbreachable sanctuary that travels with her. Words written on a page have a profound sheltering power, absorbing fear, offering companionship, and steadying the mind against life's uncertainties. Reading transports us to a different world--- one that's slower and less frantic than the world outside. Within this alternate rhythm, we rediscover our sense of dignity, a sense of self that's resilient and enduring. In Iraq, where realities can be harsh and unforgiving, reading isn't an escape or a denial of reality. Instead, it's a way of creating a liveable space within the confines of that reality – a means of carving out a sanctuary that can't be taken away. Opening

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a diary, is akin to opening a door to an inner room, a shelter that stands firm even as the world around falls apart. In this sanctuary, one can breathe freely, if only for a moment, and in that freedom, find the essence of survival.

Survival is about more than just physical needs; it's about living with purpose and meaning. While bread and shelter sustain the body, it's the nourishment of the spirit that truly keeps us alive. Nuha al-Radi'd diary celebrates life at the face of destruction and death. Through art and the documentation of art in her narrative) she keeps herself 'sane' (113) amid the chaos. Reporting her interview with CNN in her diary (30th August 1995), Al-Radi writes:

> . . . I will explain some of my sculptures to you if you don't censor what I say. These particular sculptures are made of large coiled springs from lorries that I have painted to look like snakes; inside these coiled springs are a few stones painted to look like animals. The snakes symbolize dictatorship'. I told her they swallow people whole, not just our sort of dictatorship but all of them, yours included. 'In fact,' I added, 'yours is the biggest of all because it has swallowed up the whole world. (Al-Radi 134-135)

Her art becomes a statement of 'effective visual protest' (Mehta 223) against the contemporary geopolitical condition. The stones, iron and steel used in her sculptures symbolize the steel will of Iraqis to survive amid the death-like conditions surrounding them. This resilient nature of Iraqi people is reflected repeatedly in her other art works too. In her 21st March 2003 diary-entry, Al-Radi writes:

> So only the art remains. I have my sculpture: dozens of figures of all heights painted and standing in line and made from recycled wood collected from a building site. They look as if they are demonstrating. They represent the Iraqi people and I am calling them 'We, the people.' (215)

Her recycled art celebrates the resilience of her people and at the same time makes a firm statement of resistance against the 'genocidal democracy' (Mehta

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222) of Iraq. At the same time, as pertinently pointed out by Brinda Mehta, Al-Radi's art responds to the ignorance and presumption of the west about Iraq being an uncivilized nation before their advent. Mehta rightly opines, '. . . the use of industrialized machine parts testifies to Iraq's Pre-Gulf War status as a leading industrialized nation in the Middle East whose engagements with modernity invalidate Western perceptions of Arab backwardness and primitivism' (Mehta 223). Moreover, by combining nature (stones) with industrial machinery, al-Radi's art seems to voice her dissent against the actions of so-called eco-conscious nations of the world, who, in the name of global security, has brought about irrevocable damage to the environment. The coexistence of stones and machine parts in al-Radi's sculptures convey a very important message about preserving balance between nature and civilization for the wellbeing of every nation and community. However, in her 22 April 1995 diary entry, al-Radi writes:

> Working like a dog, my hands in most awful state — with all these big pipes and iron pieces, one really gets multicoloured! My mass destructive weapon is done and I will give it eyes tomorrow. It looks quite lethal. Perhaps I will call it 'Creature of Mass Destruction' — 'Destroyer' for short. (116)

Thus, through this art work named 'Creature of Mass Destruction,' al-Radi seems to mock and reject the US propaganda of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction. As Mehta states, 'using humour and artistic re-creations as a subterfuge for political dissent, the artist demonstrates the necessity of creating such works of peace to destabilize the hegemony of warmongers' (Mehta 224).

In Iraq, where the horizon often seems constricted, reading about such acts of resilience provides that vital sustenance. It feeds the mind with possibilities, fuels the imagination, and prevents the slow erosion of thought and creativity. Reading her testament becomes an act of resistance against the stifling of ideas, a declaration that even in the most challenging circumstances like these, the human spirit can flourish. It's a way of keeping the inner light of hope and imagination alive, ensuring that even in darkness, there's a spark

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that continues to glow. Diaries in Iraq are more than just pages filled with words – they're vessels of love, legacy, and longing. These fragile pages, often worn and weathered, hold more than just words – they carry the essence of those who've held them before. Each worn cover, each turned page, whispers stories of love, loss, and resilience. When passed down through generations, these diaries become a tangible link to the past, fostering a sense of shared experience and collective memory. They remind us that our lives are part of a larger narrative, that the act of living is a shared endeavor that transcends time and circumstance.

Conclusion:

Opening a diary is an act of resilience, knotting together the frayed threads of time. With each read, the fabric of human experience is reinforced, a testament to the enduring power of stories and memories. It's not just the words that survive, but the reassurance that our individual narratives are part of a larger, interconnected whole. In a world that often seeks to disconnect, reading and writing become acts of defiance, affirming our shared humanity and the strength of our bonds. In Iraq, where silence is often imposed and speech is policed, reading becomes a powerful act of resistance. It's a lifeline that preserves memory, thought, and identity in the face of oppression. *Baghdad Diaries* with its scribbled pages and hidden histories, embody this resilience, holding together the fragments of a culture and community under siege. To read such a testimony is to endure, to refuse erasure, and to assert one's existence in the face of overwhelming adversity. In Iraq, a diary is more than just a personal record – it's a vessel for collective memory, a sanctuary for language, and a thread of continuity that weaves past, present, and future together. To open its pages is to defy silence, to honor what's worth remembering, and to assert one's existence in the face of adversity. In the quiet act of reading lies a profound declaration: we survive, and in surviving, we remember – our stories, our culture, and our humanity.

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