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by

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**The Body Under Siege: War and the Transformation of the  
Body in Betool Khedairi's *Ghayeb***

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## **Abstract**

### **The Body Under Siege: War and the Transformation of the Body in Betool Khedairi's *Ghayeb***

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Betool Khedairi's 2003 novel, *Ghayeb* or *Absent* captures through the disabilities, deformities, and illnesses of its characters the body politics of the conflicts that occurred in Iraq from 1990-1999. This report considers the way that war transforms and limits bodily interaction and bodily movement in *Ghayeb*. These politics render the body itself, whether alive or dead, infectious and toxic. Though the American media depicted the first Gulf War (1990-1991) and the allied bombings of Iraq in 1998-1999 as carefully targeted military efforts with few if any casualties, these war efforts transformed the bodily experience of Iraq's citizens through death, disability, and the restriction of movement. These military campaigns utilized depleted uranium shells and targeted factories producing plastics and chemicals, destroying and contaminating Iraq's environment. Both the immediate impact of bombings and the lingering results of the release of toxins into the environment caused illness, death, and disability. Khedairi's work intervenes in conversations concerning the transformations of bodies both internally and externally that

occur in the war zone, transformations from a whole body to a partial body, from healthy to ill, from interconnected to isolated, and from wholesome to toxic. These transformations are at the heart of the nature of war as that which renders bodies isolated, static, and toxic. As war alters the ways that bodies feel and move, it damages bodies not only in isolation but also as a community. Connections between and among individuals in the form of communities, families, and even the nation state, disappear or are destroyed because of the war. War drastically restricts community formation and corrupts existing social structures. Ultimately, the poisoned or corrupted body becomes a poison that corrupts and injures all those around it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Betool Khedairi's 2003 novel, *Ghayeb* or *Absent* captures through the disabilities, deformities, and illnesses of its characters the body politics of the the Iraq conflicts from 1990-1999. This essay considers the way that war transforms and limits bodily interaction and bodily movement in *Ghayeb*. These politics render the body itself, whether alive or dead, infectious and toxic. In order to examine the bodily transformations created by war, this essay will examine first the historical and political context of the novel, followed by theoretical conceptions of the body and its relationship to personhood and body politics. The latter half of the essay explores two defining functions of the body, sensation and movement, as portrayed in *Ghayeb*, and the ways in which the characters of the novel experience both impairment and disability of these functions. The persistent violence that the citizens of Baghdad experienced from the beginning of the First Gulf War (1990-1991) until the American invasion in 2003 and in the war that followed it, did not simply impair and disable the bodies of Baghdad's citizens, but rather rendered bodies themselves toxic.

Khedairi's work intervenes in conversations concerning the transformations of bodies both internally and externally that occur in the war zone, transformations from a whole body to a partial body, from healthy to ill, from interconnected to isolated, and from wholesome to poisoned. In this essay, I argue that these transformations are at the heart of the nature of war as that which renders bodies isolated, static, and toxic. The body bears the brunt of the ravages of war. As Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*, "the central activity of war is injuring and the central goal in war is to out-injure the opponent."<sup>1</sup> Yet, the American media and prevailing attitudes towards the first Gulf War (1990-1991) and the Allied bombings of Iraq in 1998-1999 suggested that airstrikes hit

only targets of military interest, thereby reducing casualties. As Kevin McSorley points out, “The dominant narrative framing such military-supplied imagery [from pilots’ display screen footage] was a largely celebratory account of surgical strikes that accurately targeted and cleanly destroyed enemy locations, without obvious casualties.” *Ghayeb* presents a contrasting narrative of life in Baghdad in the 1990s. The impact of war on the body, however, extends beyond those injured by bombings and even the delayed casualties of those poisoned by environmental contaminants. Every character in the novel finds his/her bodily experience limited and transformed by the nature of war.

*Ghayeb* tells the story of the life of an Iraqi family living in Baghdad in the 1990s. The novel’s main character, Dalal, is an orphan who was adopted by her aunt and uncle. Though they have become parents through this adoption, her aunt’s husband chooses instead to go by the name Abu Ghayeb or father of the absent one, since he does not have any biological children. The novel follows the daily lives of these three characters, Dalal, her aunt, and her uncle, throughout a period of intense bombings that correspond to “Operation Desert Fox” (1998-1999); however, the characters frequently discuss past events, recalling especially the first Gulf War (1990-1991) and the sanctions that followed it. Dalal suffers from the results of a childhood stroke that paralyzed one side of her face. Abu Ghayeb suffers from a severe case of psoriasis that leaves their apartment littered with his flaking skin. These characters engage with the others who live in their apartment building and who are similarly afflicted by physical impairments either brought on or exacerbated by the war. These impairments, like Dalal’s deformity, remain untreated because medical care has become expensive and medical supplies scarce. Dalal had planned to travel abroad for plastic surgery, but this option is no longer available due to the family’s worsening economic situation and state restrictions on travel. Economic sanctions have devastated the Iraqi economy causing her uncle to lose his job and her



family can no longer afford such a journey. Instead, they remain within the apartment building that provides the setting for much of the novel. The challenges that the building's inhabitants face in finding adequate medical care, education, and economic opportunity are a direct criticism of the unpredictable and senseless bombings that plague the characters of the novel.

The events of novel are set in Baghdad during the American "Desert Fox" campaign in 1998-1999. However, the novel draws connections between the First Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), American sanctions throughout the 1990s, "Operation Desert Fox" (1998-1999), and the beginning of the American Occupation in 2003, suggesting that during that time the two nations never ceased to be at war. Published originally in Arabic in 2004, the year after the American invasion, *Ghayeb* describes a nation that has been at war or under attack for twenty years. During this period, Iraqis experienced the war with Iran (September 1980-August 1988), the first Persian Gulf War (August 1990-January 1991), and increasing sanctions throughout the 1990s that eventually led to airstrikes by the United States and the United Kingdom in 1998 and 1999. During the week of December 15-22, 1998, in an operation code-named "Desert Fox," the United States and Britain launched 400 cruise missiles and 600 bombs in a major attack on Iraq.<sup>2</sup> American and British airstrikes continued throughout 1999. In an article for *The New York Times* dated August 13, 1999, Stephen Myers reported, "In the last eight months, American and British pilots have fired more than 1,100 missiles against 359 targets in Iraq."<sup>34</sup> Though the events of *Ghayeb* appear to be spread out over a number of years, the novel's present occurs during a period of intense bombing that directly impacts the apartment building and its surroundings.

Though focusing on the years prior to the invasion, as a novel written during the American invasion of Iraq (2003), *Ghayeb* shares a number of similarities with novels

depicting the invasion and the Iraq War (2003-2011), especially in its focus on issues of the body. In particular, these novels depict the risks that warfare poses to the body, the body's position as a part of the larger body politic, and the body's shifting position in relationship to other bodies. Contemporary Iraqi writers including Hassan Blasim and Ahmed Saadawi consider the impact of war on the human body and its relationships with other bodies. In Blasim's short story, "*Ma'raḍ al-Juthath*" ("The Corpse Exhibition"), published in 2012, an organization that describes itself as artistic kills and displays the corpses of a number of targets. How these targets are chosen remains unclear. The main character listens to instructions from a superior on the artistry of the craft of proper execution and display of the remains and descriptions of past exhibitions. For example, one exhibition included a large naked woman who appeared to be alive, breastfeeding a similarly life-like infant. As the displays grow increasingly grotesque, the head of the organization describes them in increasingly artistic terms, remarking repeatedly on the genius and creativity of executions, dismemberments, and creative reassembly of bodies. In the story, the destruction and reassembly of the body takes on the characteristics of art. In a similar fashion, the narrator of Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* pieces together remains from the victims of bombings until he builds an entire body. This body takes on a soul and sets out to seek revenge for the victims. However, he eventually becomes war-like and begins killing innocents. Though these novels, unlike *Ghayeb*, do not center on disabled characters in a typical sense, the bodies within these texts do take on non-normative characteristics, becoming in their death both macabre art and a war machine.

Current approaches to the works of Betool Khedairi focus on her novels' depictions of the senselessness of war and suggest that Khedairi positions art as the antithesis of war. In "Baghdad Burning," miriam cooke argues that Iraqi women writers

“do not quietly lament and submit to a fate that might be cruel, pointless violence. They fight this violence with their pens.”<sup>5</sup> cooke mentions Khedairi’s novel, *Kam badat al-samā’ qarība* (*A Sky So Close*), as well as *Ghayeb* in her article. She argues that Khedairi, “rejected senseless violence, whoever the perpetrator might be.”<sup>6</sup> She argues that Iraqi women’s texts that have come out of war, like those of Khedairi, explicitly and without reservation call out violence against civilians as immoral and illegal. Similarly, though focusing on Derrida and Agamben, and arguing for a connection between fiction and testimony, Ikram Masmoudi writes, concerning Khedairi’s *Kam badat al-sama qaribah*, that the novel posits ballet and sculpture as the antidote and antithesis to the destruction of war.<sup>7</sup> Masmoudi states,

The originality of this narrative is not just in invoking the aesthetics of dance as a witness and a countermeasure to war and destruction but also in its didactic strategy, explaining the fundamental principles of ballet as an art form. It is very interesting to notice that in order to ‘testify’, the students are using a language (ballet) not native to their culture, perhaps to gain more visibility and have more impact...dance (as an abstract form) and sculpture (as a full, concrete art form) are being depicted side by side. By the novel’s end, however, both will be silenced by the war.<sup>8</sup>

These critical readings of Khedairi focus largely on her rejection of violence and the novels as positing remedies or functioning as resistance to the war itself. In “Arab Women Arab Wars,” miriam cooke argues that those who write during war do so in an effort to intervene in the situation and make a difference. Though the chaos of war leaves little time for reflection and writing, and though these writers are often forgotten, their texts do more than repeat canned tales of heroism and suffering. For cooke, these texts tell us more about war than those written from the relative comfort and safety of the post-

war period.<sup>9</sup> Though in exile in Jordan, Khedairi writes during a time of war in her home country. By setting her novel in what seems like a previous conflict, however, Khedairi emphasizes the continuity of the Iraqi encounter with war.

While critical engagement with Betool Khedairi's novels has focused on their engagement with war, the connection between war and the body in *Ghayeb* remains unexamined. The war transforms the bodies of the characters in the novel. This transformation is part of Khedairi's critique of violence and the destruction that it causes. Though cooke discusses some of the ways that Khedairi criticizes the war, she does not focus on Khedairi's presentation of the individual body as a locus of violence. War dramatically reduces access to reliable sources of food and water, healthcare, education, and employment. *Ghayeb* details the lasting impact of the Persian Gulf War, not just in the political relationship between Iraq and the United States but also in the lasting bodily and environmental damage that Iraq and its people continue to face. As the characters in *Ghayeb* move on with their lives in a city and nation under siege, they are forced to adapt to the physical changes that daily bombings wreak on their bodies, minds, and environment. The transformations of the body as detailed in *Ghayeb* emphasize that the goal of the bombings was not just the destruction of targets of military significance but aimed at the destruction of both individual bodies and the collective national body as well.

### **WHY FOCUS ON THE BODY?**

With scientific developments and the advent of modern medicine, the body has come to assume priority over the mind and soul as the locus of subject formation in philosophical thought. Though theories of war have often focused on war as a practice of politics, modern warfare also causes widespread physical destruction of bodies and the

spaces they inhabit. Complementing Carl von Clausewitz's famous analysis of war, Kevin McSorley maintains that "The reality of war is not just politics by any other means but politics incarnate, politics written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women."<sup>10</sup> Though *War and the Body* focuses largely on the bodies of soldiers and their embodied transformations from civilian to soldier to (often disabled) veteran, much of the material that McSorley examines in the introduction can be used to examine transformations in the bodies of noncombatants as well. Yet the American public viewed American military intervention in the Gulf as a war without casualties, as McSorley states with regards to the Gulf War (1990-1991): "Wounding and killing seemed hardly to exist in this abstract virtual register, where targeting grids and nebulous pixelated forms flared and vanished on pilots' monitors and viewers' television screens alike."<sup>11</sup> This erasure or absence in the American media of bodies and casualties plays out in the politics of *Ghayeb's* translation. In an effort to persuade the English-speaking reader of the veracity of many of the novel's scenes, the translator, Muhayaman Jamil, prefaces a number of chapters with citations from historical studies concerning the violence of the Gulf War, American sanctions in the 1990s, and US and British airstrikes in the late 1990s. The novel itself demands a consideration of the toll of war and violence on the bodies of Iraqis.

In considering the transformations of relations between bodies and within bodies, one must first delineate and define what is meant by body. Though a seemingly simple task, philosophical, biological and even political conceptions of the body have shifted dramatically over time. In his work, *A Body Worth Defending*, Ed Cohen traces the history of conceptions of the body in European thought in order to develop an argument concerning the connection between biological immunity and legal immunity. Moving through British, German, and French thinkers, Cohen demonstrates that the conception of

personhood as connected to the body, rather than the soul, develops in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> He draws this conclusion from analyses of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, suggesting that Locke's claims of the individual's ownership over his own body mark the birth of the modern body as that which through ownership of its labor defines personhood.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Cohen argues that the modern body "is a form of violence that we do to the world – and that is done to us."<sup>14</sup> The body becomes biopolitical in order to resist the violence that monarchs and feudal hierarchies inflicted on their subjects.

As part of an effort to re-exert control over the body, the state, now denied ownership of labor by notions of self-ownership of the body, began to manage bodies through regulation of medical professionals and mandatory vaccination regimes. Cohen's primary example of the state's management of bodies focuses on the arguments of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). In Malthus's theories, the good of the state depends upon the health of its people. Public health and the citizens' bodies do not signify because of their individual abilities. Rather, public health becomes important because good bodies make good laborers. With developments in medicine such as the smallpox vaccine and the demands of cities and nations facing epidemics, the state began to control and regulate the medical profession.

Patricia Clough utilizes the term body-as-organism to describe these trends, which depict the body as a unified whole. This unified body can be either the individual body of the laborer or the collective body of the laboring class, both of which are treated by the state and the state's medical establishment as single entity. Clough offers the biomediated body as an alternative conception of the body that challenges the tendency of the body-as-organism to ignore the relationship between the body and its environment. Clough asserts that the "biomediated body challenges the autopoietic character of the

body-as-organism that, by the late nineteenth century, had become the model of what a body is.”<sup>15</sup> Biomediation, in this line of argument, asserts that the body-as-organism is incapable of creating and reproducing itself in any strict fashion. To do so would be contradictory to evolution because it would characterize the body as static. If the body reproduced itself only, then there would be no possibility for the changes of evolution. Clough’s argument is twofold: first, technology transforms the biomediated body in its ability to mass-produce genetic material. Second, technology mediates relationships between bodies.<sup>16</sup> Yet Clough’s biomediated body does not simply rely on technology. Technology becomes a part of the body, “expanding what the biological body can do while, however, remaining biological.”<sup>17</sup> Clough asserts that changes are necessary to the biological conception of the body in order to accommodate the informational substrate of the body. The body communicates information through its very presence and appearance. The biomediated body “engages populations in terms of their ‘vulnerable biologies’ - vulnerable not only to illness, life and death, but also to national and international regulatory policies.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the body cannot and does not exist wholly separated from its environment and surroundings. It communicates and interacts with other bodies and technologies. An example relevant to the case at hand is the way that the technologies of war mediate bodies. Chemical and nuclear warfare transforms bodies, rearticulating and rewriting them at the genetic level.

Such transformations change the way that the body interacts with its surroundings, both animate and inanimate. Brian Massumi offers a direct approach to defining the body’s functions: it moves and it feels. The body mediates human experiences through this sensation and movement, acting as the first level of connection between people within communities and as such it plays a considerable role in the creation of communities. As war restricts movement, it also limits occasions for affective

connection. When the skin or the surface of the body is damaged, it changes the way the body feels, touches, and forms connection. Massumi's definition of the body's functions will organize the analysis that follows as I examine the ways that war transforms a healthy, feeling, moving body into a toxic body in *Ghayeb*.

### **SKIN: A REACTIVE BOUNDARY BETWEEN BODIES**

The nature of the body-as-organism insists upon the skin as a boundary that exists between bodies, without taking into account the function of the skin as a sensory organ and space of social contact both visually and through touch. As a mediating boundary between bodies, the skin serves a vital role in maintaining human connections. In analyzing bodies in her work, *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed makes the point that it is difficult to determine the explicit boundaries of the body. One might suggest that the skin functions as the boundary of the body. However, the skin responds to touch, it feels, and it engages with things.<sup>19</sup> One can invade someone's personal space without physically touching him or her, and the moment of physical touch can be a violation. As a surface or boundary, the skin seems to separate the body from other bodies, yet the skin feels and responds; it is a space where the intensity of emotions, like shame, is registered.<sup>20</sup> While seeming to protect the subject or self from the exterior, skin at the same time exposes us to that which is external, offering the possibility of touch and encounter.<sup>21</sup> The skin as a space of touch and encounter marks a space of contact between bodies. This contact, especially in the case of *Ghayeb*, is the first space where the body encounters violence.

The remnants of a war sever Dalal's first human connections in her infancy. In the opening of the novel, the reader learns of Dalal's family history and the deaths of both of her parents when a landmine left behind after the 1967 war exploded underneath



their vehicle. Dalal reports that witnesses to the accident saw a small bundle fly from the front window and settle in the sand without suffering any visible injury.<sup>22</sup> Though later in the novel, the reader learns of the disfigurement that impacted Dalal during her childhood, this accident is the first moment in which war touches Dalal, separating her physically and permanently from her immediate family. In the moment she is thrown from her mother's arms, the connection between mother and child is permanently severed and Dalal loses the most basic of human connections. The image of an infant thrown from her mother's arms emphasizes the violence of this loss of connection. Though Dalal's aunt and uncle take her in, it becomes clear that this relationship is not at all the same. Dalal's uncle refused to change his name according to custom, Dalal says: "He didn't wish to be referred to as the father of his deceased sister-in-law's child...I could never understand this arrangement...I decided to call him 'my aunt's husband' instead of *amou* – uncle." (*lam yarḡhab an yusammā bi-ism bint al-marḡūma ukht zawjatihi...lam afham ḡattā kabarī ittafāqahumā hadhā, lidhā qarrartu bi-dawrī an unādīhi 'zawj khālatī' badalan min 'ammū.*)<sup>23</sup> Her aunt follows her uncle's request and is referred to as Umm Ghayeb or the mother of the absent one, an experience mirrored in Dalal's situation as an orphan or child of absent parents. Both social connections and the physical connection of touch are completely disrupted.

Touch is not the only way that the skin facilitates connection between bodies. The novel also addresses the way visible physical differences impact various characters' abilities to operate in society. Dalal's facial disfigurement limits and alters her connections with other characters. At the same time, Dalal connects the subtle nature of her disability with her own feelings of unimportance. Though she faces stares in the street, she berates herself for her own suffering since the war did not directly cause her disfigurement, but only prevented her from accessing treatment. Dalal's disability

prevents her from meeting the demands for normative female beauty. Though it seems primarily a physical impairment, her facial disfigurement impacts her ability to meet social demands. At the same time, society ranks and orders certain types of suffering as more worthy of sympathy than others, leaving her outside the limits of social sympathy. She constantly dwells on their inability to go abroad for her plastic surgery because of the failing economy, but does not discuss these thoughts with the other characters in the novel. Recalling the experience that caused her deformity while looking at a painting, Dalal says,

Outside the painting, anger is forbidden. It is something I have never been entitled to. A minor deviation of the mouth inflicted by God is trivial in comparison to the fatal diseases inflicted by human beings. I must minimize my misfortune amidst the calamities surrounding us. The doctors explain that when the blood fails to reach a certain area of the brain, the result is a stroke. I was small at the time. I had a fever and then the stroke; a mini stroke. The blood failed to reach the left side of my brain, making my mouth deviate to the right.

*ammā khārij al-lawḥa fa-mamnū‘ al-ghaḍab. lam ya‘ud lī al-ḥaqq bi-dhālik. inḥirāf basīṭ fī al-famm, min allāh, innahu lā shay‘ bi-l-nisba ilā amrāḍ mumīta, yaṣn‘ahā al-bashar. kāna ‘alayy an atanāsā muṣibatī waṣṭ al-maṣā‘ib allattī tadūr hawlanā. sharaḥa al-aṭibbā’: ḥīna lā yaṣil al-damm ilā al-dimāgh yusabbib dhālik jalṭa. kuntu ṣaghīra. i‘taratnī ḥummā, thumma jalṭa ṣaghīra. julayṭa. idhan, lam yaṣil al-damm ilā al-jānib al-aysar min dimāghī bi-mā anna fammī mashūb ilā al-yamīn. .<sup>24</sup>*

Dalal makes note of the individuals who stare at her in the streets, but feels that since she, unlike so many others, is not a victim of war, she cannot complain about her disfigurement. In this scene, Dalal creates a hierarchy of illness; unlike the diseases



bodies in society. Abu Ghayeb's psoriasis limits and impedes his interactions with the other characters, frustrating his wife and niece, and rendering him too vulnerable to the stares and judgment of society. Abu Ghayeb's greatest struggle with psoriasis is the way it changes his appearance. He is visibly different in ways that cannot be hidden. This struggle with difference is a key feature of the challenges of disability. That which is unusual or different provokes stares, and interactions between normative and non-normative bodies are fraught with tension. It is not until he meets a Jordanian businesswoman, Randa, who suffers from the same condition that he begins to acclimate to his condition. Much to his wife's chagrin, in Randa he finds a confidante and willing listener for his litany of treatments and the possible causes of his disorder.

In the same way that the bombings inflict physical harm on the characters of the novel, they also transform the function and appearance of the city of Baghdad. Early in the novel, the first mention of Abu Ghayeb's flaking skin is juxtaposed with the image of the city covered with a black grime. A section describing Abu Ghayeb's affliction is followed immediately by a description of the city: "Black lines trickle down the sides of buildings, walls, and houses. Stripes of varying thickness dribble down from top to bottom." (*kharrat khuṭūṭ sūd 'alā judrān al-buyūt wa-al-abniya wa-al-'imārāt al-sakanīyya. aqlām bi-kathāfāt mukhtalifa dhābat min a'lā ilā asfal.*)<sup>27</sup> The disease eats away at Abu Ghayeb's skin in a similar fashion to the way that soot and pollutants from the bombs, mixed with the rain, eat away at and stain the surfaces of the buildings in Baghdad. Dalal's descriptions of the city focus on its visible transformations and she compares those changes to bodily injuries. In another such instance, the bombed out pavements resemble dislocated shoulders.<sup>28</sup> While some of these changes are merely aesthetic, others impact movement throughout the city.

## **MOTION: DISABILITY AND THE HINDRANCE OF WAR**

In the same way that disability inhibits an individual's capacity to meet social demands, it also prevents access to certain physical and social spaces. A body that cannot move or leave its apartment loses access to institutions like the hospital as well as to certain social interactions. Additionally, the depiction of the city of Baghdad as disabled and constantly under threat of new bombings further inhibits the movement of the characters of the novel: "With the worsening of the economic situation, the flat residents have tended to venture out less often, but for some reason, their movement between the different floors has increased." (*bi-sabab taraddī al-ẓurūf al-iqtisādīyya qalla taḥarruk ahl al-`imāra fī al-khārij, wa-li-sabab mā zāda taḥarrukuhum mā bayn al-ṭawābiq.*)<sup>29</sup> This increased movement within the building and the intensified interest in the activities of neighbors within the building do not mean, however, that all of the residents know much about each other. Dalal mentions moving up and down in the building to reach each space, yet once she is in each apartment it seems to operate distinctly and without interference from the other apartments in the building. By the end of the novel, the reader discovers that many of the inhabitants of the building have been engaging in illegal activities that the other residents were unaware of: Dalal's uncle smuggles antiquities, Ilham sells human organs, Umm Mazin's potions cause illness, and Saad is a spy who reports each of them individually to the authorities. Like the skin of the body, the shell of the apartment building provides a modicum of protection for the residents inside it. Yet this shell is permeable and easily pierced by bombs or infiltrated by the agents of state violence, Saad and Adel. Not only do the residents of the building find their movement highly restricted, they also discover that their movements occur under intense scrutiny.

In areas with restricted movement, smaller communities band together in order to meet their own needs. Enterprising characters like Umm Mazin and Ilham work to meet the medical needs of the residents of their apartment building even as their own movement is increasingly restricted to that space. Many state institutions have been destroyed by the first Gulf War, by the ensuing sanctions, or by the current bombings. In order to fill the void left by the absence of such institutions, enterprising citizens market their skills as treatments for afflictions both social and medical. One such individual, Umm Mazin, lives above Dalal and her family. The women of the novel often turn to Umm Mazin because they lack the resources to see a doctor and even the hospital lacks the most basic of remedies. The nurse, Ilham, who often brings the residents of the building medicines that are otherwise impossible to obtain, turns to Umm Mazin for a remedy to help her sleep<sup>30</sup> and later takes her remedies following her mastectomy.<sup>31</sup> Umm Mazin's remedies are all specific to the individual seeking her aid. While those that she gives to Ilham do not require reciting lines from the Quran or special charms, for many of her other customers such prescriptions are routine. Umm Mazin takes on incurable cases, such as a woman afflicted with paralysis. In such instances she often finds supernatural causes for her patients' pain.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the doctors and medical services that are by and large inaccessible to the characters of the novel, Umm Mazin's approach towards treating the body focuses less on the body as an organism and more on the way that the body lives and functions within the larger context of the community. Her treatments propose to heal not just physical challenges but also mend (or in some cases destroy) relationships and she seeks causes for physical ailments in social ills. For most of the novel, Umm Mazin's customers seem satisfied with her treatments and continue to seek her out even as Umm Mazin's own mobility becomes limited to her apartment. Though Dalal is quite skeptical, Ilham and another neighbor strive to convince her that

the most important element of her treatments is that those who ask for them believe in their efficacy.<sup>33</sup> This reasoning, however, does not reach the ears of the police who eventually arrest Umm Mazin and her assistant and charge them with sorcery and witchcraft.

However, community efforts to meet their own economic, educational and health needs are of limited utility as the state moves to eliminate unofficial sources of support. Though there are few, if any, state resources to meet basic human needs, the state heavily restricts and punishes those who attempt to work outside its purview. Though characters like Umm Mazin cannot even leave their own apartments, the police as agents of the state suffer under no such restrictions and are able to infiltrate each apartment in the building at will. The state itself becomes a disabling force by limiting community efforts to ease suffering. By the end of the novel, Ilham, Umm Mazin, and even Abu Ghayeb have been arrested for various offenses, all of which they committed in an effort to support themselves financially in a time of war and sanctions. Though the population cannot rely on the state for medical care, education, clean drinking water, or electricity, they can rely on the police to seek out offenders and mete out punishment. That is not to say that all of the offenses that the police arrest the characters for were minor, but rather that during difficult times, the state is more interested in maintaining control over its people and their movements than in providing necessary services like healthcare and education.

As the characters face an increasing inability to leave their building, other types of movement are similarly inhibited, including the ability to meet the social expectations of employment, marriage, and family. The narrative itself also suffers from a lack of forward movement since there seems to be no way out of the war. Each day is much like the day before and life seems to be nothing more than a series of loosely connected events. Dalal does not express hopes or dreams for the future, her education does not

move her in the direction of a job, her relationship does not point towards marriage, and, by the latter half of the book, she even stops mentioning her desire for cosmetic surgery to correct the scars of her stroke. Yet, movement remains a vital part of life.

Eventually this lack of movement comes to be equated with death. In a particularly insightful scene, Saad, the hairdresser, suggests that the only way that the individuals of the apartment building can resist war is through life and movement: “Movement is a blessing, isn’t that what they say?...We must continue to move. Movement is important. There’s salvation in movement; ceasing to move implies dying...People must continue to move, the economy must move, and our weapons must continue to move.” (*al-ḥaraka baraka alaysa ka-dhālik?...yajib an nataḥarrak. al-taḥarruk muhim. fī al-ḥaraka inqādh wa-al-tawaqquf ya’nī al-mawt...al-nās yajib an yataḥarrukū, wa-al-iqtisād yajib an yataḥarak, wa-asliḥatnā yajib ’an tataḥarrak.*)<sup>34</sup>

When a body ceases to move it ceases to live, and Saad equates this movement with the movement of the economy and the military. If bodies cease moving, then the economy ceases to move, and if the economy ceases to move the nation fails to resist the war that afflicts it. In this conflict there is no invading army and no soldiers to stand against. Instead, there is unending, faceless bombing. The only resistance that the characters can offer to the war takes the form of resistance through life. By refusing to become part of the war, and refusing to become a casualty of war, they resist the efforts of violence to transform them bodily. This resistance in the form of bodily movement is not simply the movement of a single body but depends on the movement of a collection of bodies. However, the ongoing bombing traps citizens in their buildings and in their individual apartments. Without a physical enemy to confront, the state turns against its own citizens and instead further restricts their movement.



## TOXICITY: THE POISONED AND POISONOUS BODY

Though the novel mentions a number of different periods of bombing, depictions of life during an airstrike are few and far between. Instead the novel discusses the impact of bombs long after airstrikes. The extensive destruction and pollution caused by the “clean” and “intelligent” bombs used by the United States and its allies in both the First Gulf War and the bombings throughout the 1990s rendered much of the Iraqi countryside toxic. The novel references multiple periods of bombing both explicitly and by implication. In some scenes, the characters discuss the first Gulf War (1990-1991) and the bombs that fell then. However, the bombs that fall in the novel’s present explicitly reference the American military campaigns in 1998 and 1999, while also calling to mind and the early days of the Iraq invasion which began a year before the publication of the novel. In one scene, Abu Ghayeb and Dalal discuss the impact of the supposedly “clean” (*naẓīfa*) or “smart” (*dhakiyya*) bombs from the first Gulf War (1990-1991) saying, “Truly smart weapons, they destroyed communications centers, sewage plants, and electricity generates. And they remembered to wipe out the water purification units as well. With their intelligence, they deprived a whole nation of clean drinking water.” (*fī ‘lan asliḥa dhakīyya, faqad qaṣafat marākiz al-ittiṣālāt, wa-marākiz tanẓīf al-majārī, wa-nasafat muwalidāt al-kahraba’, wa-ṭab‘an lam tansā an taquḍḍī ‘alā mashārī‘ tanaqīyyat al-miyāh. bi-dhakā’ihā ḥaramat sha‘ban bi-akmalih min al-mā’ al-naqī.*)<sup>35</sup> The headline that provoked this discussion stated that the United States asserted that it had used only “clean” bombs in its attacks on Iraq. The claim in the headline is that contrary to the experience of the characters of the novel, and contrary to the experience of a number of Gulf War veterans, these bombs did not include chemical contaminants that caused disease.<sup>36</sup> Ilham tells Dalal stories of the children who she encounters in the hospital whose playing with leftover shrapnel from bombing made them victims of depleted

uranium.<sup>37</sup> The use of depleted uranium shells by Allied forces in the first Gulf War has been well documented. Fisk asserts, “Tens of thousands of these projectiles were fired at the Iraqis in February 1991 in the fields south of the city of Basra, the fertile lands from which millions of Iraqis acquire their food. Many of the children dying of leukemia and lymphoma cancer were not even born when the war took place.”<sup>38</sup> Through the toxins left behind in the soil, the affects of bombing remained long after Allied forces left the country. Even without the renewed bombing in the late 1990s, Iraqis remained under a poisonous siege from the environmental contamination from reportedly “clean” weapons.

Abu Ghayeb and Dalal move on from this question of toxicity and cleanliness to the question of the results of the extended bombing campaigns. Regardless of whether the bombs themselves were clean or dirty, they destroyed the structures that worked to ensure human health and sanitation. The tap water is no longer safe to drink and those who drink it suffer from cholera and typhoid.<sup>39</sup> Dalal reads another account of massive contamination caused by the destruction during the first Gulf War (1990-1991),

I turn the page and read what the diarist has written. The factory that made household cleaning agents had been bombed. Ninety kilos of insecticide had seeped out. Another page described how the plastics factory had been bombed: tiny fragments of polyethylene had been dispersed into the atmosphere where they mingled with paint, industrial glass, solid and liquid wax, black graphite, and burning rubber tires.

*qalabtu al-ṣafha wa-qara`tu mā katabahu kātiba al-yawmiyyāt wāṣifa tasarrub tis`un kīlūghrāman min mawād qātīla li-l-ḥasharāt natījat infījār maṣna` mawādd al-tanzīf al-manziliyya. wa-ṣafha ukhrā tasif kayfa tamma qaṣf maṣna` li-l-blāstīk, ḥaythu taṭāyarat fī al-ajwā` ḥubaybāt min mādat al-būlī ithīlīn*

*tatadākhal bi-ašbāgh wa-zujāj šinā'iy, wa-kammiyyāt min sham' ṣalb wa-sā'il, wa-krafiṭ aswad, wa-ṭṭārāt maṭṭāṭiyya muḥtariqa.*<sup>40</sup>

These substances become mixed with the air and water in the atmosphere and rain down on the city leaving the buildings streaked with black. Whether the bombs are “clean” or not is immaterial since, just by striking certain targets these missiles succeeded in poisoning the environment and the population.

Environmental poisons, especially from depleted uranium shells are one of the largest causes of wartime illness in the novel. In the case of Ilham, the nurse, breast cancer is a direct result of exposure to depleted uranium. Cancer's corruption of her body leads directly to economic corruption in an effort to afford her treatment. After discovering that her work at a hospital in Basra has born “surprise fruit” (*thamrat al-mufāja'a*) in the form of breast cancer, she is forced to seek treatment at a different hospital to avoid losing her job.<sup>41</sup> The war poisons Ilham both figuratively and literally: literally she has developed a cancerous growth due to exposure to contaminants; figuratively, Ilham's illness drives her to corruption. Her employment as a nurse cannot possibly pay for the costs of her treatment and mastectomy, so she takes organs from the operating theater at the hospital where she works and sells them to the butcher to dice up and mix with the lamb and beef.<sup>42</sup> This event seems too terrible for even the characters in the novel; no one discusses the reasons behind Ilham's absence once she is arrested. The facts of the case are stated once, not to be mentioned again, and Ilham's apartment is surrendered to Umm Mazin when a missile hits the building, destroying Umm Mazin's apartment. Ilham's crime is unspeakable, though Dalal misses her and mentions her sadness at the loss of her friend, but it is not until the end of the novel that the characters begin to discuss the horror of the consumption of human flesh.

Toxicity, brought on by war, both poisons the body and renders it poisonous. As Mel Chen argues, both animate and inanimate objects can be toxic and acceptable levels of toxicity are determined by political discourse. Yet, according to the assertions of the United States and Britain, these thresholds were not crossed by the remnants of depleted uranium shells left behind after the First Persian Gulf War. As Mel Chen illustrates in *Animacies*, toxic people, not just chemicals, also arise in discourses of toxicity.<sup>43</sup> Of the concept of toxicity, Chen notes that “there seems to be a basic semantic schema for toxicity: in this schema, two bodies are proximate; the first body, living or abstract, is under threat by the second; the second has the effect of poisoning, and altering, the first, causing a degree of damage, disability, or even death.”<sup>44</sup> In such a schema, political negotiations define what is and is not a toxin and the appropriate thresholds for toxins in public space.<sup>45</sup> In this case, the same foreign governments that were attacking Iraq set those thresholds. Any of a number of materials can poison the population. The human flesh poisons the meat that the butcher sells, rendering it unsafe for human consumption. As such, toxicity is not restricted entirely to pollutants and man-made contaminants but can also refer to biological waste. Especially in spaces of war, these poisoned and contaminated bodies cause damage, disability, and even death. In a conversation with Dalal early in the novel, Ilham casually mentions the bodies of deceased infants in the hospital, pointing out that they had to be incinerated to prevent the spread of disease.<sup>46</sup> Yet, by the end of the novel, it is clear that the state’s inability to properly dispose of the bodies of those killed in the bombings has created a major health hazard.

Animal and insect behavior is a common indicator of the presence of toxins and Abu Ghayeb’s bees serve to alert the characters to the presence of toxic bodies near the apartment building. In the final chapters of the novel, Abu Ghayeb’s bees begin to behave erratically. Though they have for much of the novel been quite happy feeding on the

nectar from nearby date trees, following a bombing that destroys many of the date trees and wipes out an entire apartment building, Dalal and Abu Ghayeb discover that hives have begun to war with one another. Dalal describes the scene: “the bees start circling around the hives in a distinctly different manner from the way they usually fly - in a straight line. Some of the bees also appear very heavy, and unable to defend themselves.” (*ma‘ dhālika bada‘ al-naḥl yaḥīr min al-khalīyya bi-dawā‘ir ‘alā ghayr ‘ādatih ḥaythu yakūn ṭayarānuh ‘alā shakl khuṭūṭ mustaqīma, wa-aṣḥaḥ ba‘d al-naḥl thaqīlan wa-ghayr qādir ‘alā al-difā‘ ‘an nafsih..*)<sup>47</sup> Abu Ghayeb has no idea why the bees have become so aggressive, but Dalal suspects it must have something to do with the contents of the tent that the military has recently erected in the adjacent tennis court. She discovers that this tent has become the resting place for the bodies of the victims from the destroyed apartment building and informs Abu Ghayeb that the bees seem to be feeding off the blood of the corpses rather than from the nectar of nearby trees. Abu Ghayeb can no longer sell the honey since it is contaminated with the remains of the dead and the bees begin to needlessly destroy each other. With the bees drunk on the blood of the deceased, yet again the possibility of cannibalism is introduced in the novel. The bee’s honey appears to be contaminated with the blood and other fluids of the victims of war, much like the butcher’s meat was contaminated with the organs from the hospital operating theater. These events are largely unspeakable and Ilham’s crimes are never discussed beyond a factual statement of their nature; furthermore, Abu Ghayeb refuses to sell his honey, and the implication of the blood of the casualties of war as the fuel of war remains.

The inanimate, decaying body becomes a vector for disease and violence that impacts not only the remaining living bodies, but also their environment. The bees that feed on these bodies imbibe and become war-like, transforming the tennis courts into a

battlefield. The lifeless bodies that remain in the wake of such destruction are themselves poisonous to the environment around them. Like any good invading force, the bees' movements are informed by unpredictability, they fly in curves rather than straight lines. They attack when least expected and utilize innovative tactics in an effort to destroy their enemy. They refuse to adhere to the normative social behaviors of the hive. Similarly, Abu and Umm Ghayeb, like Ilham before them, are tempted to disregard taboos concerning the consumption of human flesh in order to secure their own economic situation. Umm Ghayeb pressures Abu Ghayeb to collect and sell the honey anyway, even if they have fed on the blood of the war dead. The poisoning transforms the bodies of the bees and their society. Like Ilham they strive to enable the further poisoning of the population through the consumption of diseased and decaying human flesh. Abu Ghayeb's refusal to heed his wife's entreaties to sell the contaminated honey leaves the family without any form of income. In the end, he attempts to sell his collection of original paintings by famous Iraqi artists by smuggling them across the border in his beehives and is betrayed by Saad, the hairdresser.

## **CONCLUSION**

In altering the ways that bodies feel and move, war damages not only the bodies themselves but also the ways that they connect with other bodies. War drastically restricts community formation and corrupts existing social structures. The exigencies of war drive people to desperate lengths to maintain their own safety. Agents of the state find it simple to turn individuals against each other in exchange for money and security. Individuals cannot trust their own neighbors, friends, and family members. As war transforms the physical appearance of the city and its residents, those with visible physical differences come under additional scrutiny.

Both corruption of the body and corruption of workers and institutions render bodies toxic to each other. Just as illness ceases to be contained or quarantined during war, corruption expands to fill the void left after the destruction of gainful employment. Supplies of food and water cannot be trusted to be safe even when there are no other options. Modern warfare claims to be fought without casualty, relying instead on the indirect casualties from life in a nation without reliable electricity, clean drinking water, or the ability to remove environmental contaminants. Through the damage that war causes to the surface of the body and the appearance of the self, as well as the way it limits the body's ability to move, war attacks society at its most individual level: the body. In an effort to fend off or avenge such attacks, the body becomes part of the war, perpetuating violence in a misguided effort to secure its own future. The poisoned or corrupted body itself becomes a poison that ultimately corrupts and injures all those around it.

The novel makes a compelling case for the way that death begets death and war begets war. As Abu Ghayeb's bees encounter the casualties of bombing, they perpetuate the behaviors that cause death, becoming war-like themselves. This toxicity mimics the nature of corpses as vectors of disease, but transforms this disease into one of behavior, action, and interaction. Like the bees, as each character faces his/her own mortality, s/he succumbs to the temptations of illegal and immoral actions. One by one they are killed, arrested, or move away, and the novel concludes with Dalal and her aunt living alone in the apartment building, observing the signs of a new war in the making, and awaiting its beginning.

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- <sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain : The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1985), <http://UTXA.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=472372>. 12.
- <sup>2</sup> Ali Abunimah and Rania Masri, "The Media's Deadly Spin on Iraq," in *Iraq under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War*, ed. Anthony Arnove and Ali Abunimah, Updated ed (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2002), 101.
- <sup>3</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "In Intense but Little-Noticed Fight, Allies Have Bombed Iraq All Year," *The New York Times*, August 13, 1999, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/13/world/in-intense-but-little-noticed-fight-allies-have-bombed-iraq-all-year.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Kevin McSorley, *War and the Body : Militarisation, Practice and Experience* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), <http://UTXA.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=1122846>. 18.
- <sup>5</sup> miriam cooke, "Baghdad Burning: Women Write War in Iraq," *World Literature Today* 81, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 23–26. 23.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. 25.
- <sup>7</sup> Ikram Masmoudi, "Portraits of Iraqi Women: Between Testimony and Fiction.," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 4, no. 1/2 (July 2010): 59–77. 69.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. 69
- <sup>9</sup> Miriam Cooke, "Arab Women Arab Wars," *Cultural Critique*, no. 29 (December 1, 1994): 5–29. 7.
- <sup>10</sup> McSorley, *War and the Body : Militarisation, Practice and Experience*. 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. 18.
- <sup>12</sup> Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). 76.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. 86-87.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. 88.
- <sup>15</sup> Patricia Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedica, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). 207.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. 207.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. 208.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. 223.
- <sup>19</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Transformations (London; New York: Routledge, 2000). 44.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Biddle, "Shame," *Australian Feminist Studies* 2, no. 6 (1997): 222-239. 228
- <sup>21</sup> Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1993). 145.
- <sup>22</sup> Betool Khedairi, *Absent: A Novel*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007). 1/5. For all citations from *Ghayeb*, the first page number references the translation and the second the original text.



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- <sup>23</sup> Ibid. 1/5.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. 72/86.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. 47/57
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. 47/57
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. 3/7.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. 27/35.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. 57/69.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid. 85/102.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid. 121/147.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. 106/128.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. 112/137.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid. 161/196.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid. 66/79.
- <sup>36</sup> A number of returning American veterans of the Gulf War reported symptoms ranging from fatigue, breathing difficulties, headaches, memory loss, and cognitive disfunction. Paula Anne Ford-Martin and Ken R. Wells, “Gulf War Syndrome,” in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Medicine*, ed. Laurie J. Fundukian, 4th ed., vol. 3 (Detroit: Gale, 2011), 1938–41.
- <sup>37</sup> Khedairi, *Absent*. 79/95.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Fisk, “The Hidden War,” in *Iraq under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War*, ed. Anthony Arnove and Ali Abunimah, Updated ed. (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2002), 121–31. 120.
- <sup>39</sup> Khedairi, *Absent*. 58/70.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid. 61/73
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid. 80/96.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid. 131/158.
- <sup>43</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Perverse Modernities (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). 190.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid. 191.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid. 191.
- <sup>46</sup> Khedairi, *Absent*. 60/71.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid. 182/223.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/13/world/in-intense-but-little-noticed-fight-allies-have-bombed-iraq-all-year.html>.
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