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## Sexual Assault as a Colonial Ideology to Annihilate the Iraqi National Identity in Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar* in Baghdad

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### ABSTRACT

Regardless of the outcome of events consequently, a person's identity throughout conflicts and wars has a lasting effect on the psyche of a nation, leaving a legacy of trauma, suffering, and sorrow. A nation's psychological and symbolic components, such as the identity of those impacted, their process of healing, and their sympathy for the deceased, are also affected by these wounds, in addition to its physical assets, such as its buildings, artefacts, and natural landscapes. Rasha Fadhil in her dramatic text *Ishtar* in Baghdad employed the Iraqi mythology to highlight the importance of Iraq's historical culture to its national identity. This study investigates the role of the Iraqi mythology in exposing US forces practices to erasure Iraq cultural history. Moreover, the study examines the sexual assault as a US forces ideology to annihilate Iraq's national identity through the lens of the cultural genocide. The study aims to contribute a deeper understanding of the annihilation of national identity via sexual assault due to occupation ideology.

**Keywords:** Annihilation, identity, *Ishtar*, national, sexual.

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الاعتداء الجنسي كأيدولوجية استعمارية لمحو الهوية الوطنية العراقية في "عشتار في بغداد"  
للقاصة رشا فاضل

د. مروان خليل يوسف

كلية المعارف الجامعة

### المستخلص

بغض النظر عن نتيجة الأحداث، فإن هوية الشخص خلال الصراعات والحروب لها تأثير دائم على نفسية الأمة، تاركة إرثاً من الصدمة والمعاناة والحزن. تتأثر أيضاً بهذه الجراح مكونات الأمة النفسية والرمزية، مثل هوية المتضررين وعملية شفاءهم وتعاطفهم مع المتوفى، بالإضافة إلى أصولها المادية مثل مبانيها وآثارها وطبيعتها. المناظر الطبيعية. رشا فاضل في نصها الدرامي عشتار في بغداد وظفت الأساطير العراقية لتسليط الضوء على أهمية الثقافة التاريخية للعراق لهويته الوطنية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور الأساطير العراقية في فضح ممارسات القوات الأمريكية في طمس التاريخ الثقافي العراقي. علاوة على ذلك، تتناول الدراسة الاعتداء الجنسي باعتباره أيدولوجية القوات الأمريكية الرامية إلى القضاء على الهوية الوطنية العراقية من خلال عدسة الإبادة الثقافية. وتهدف الدراسة إلى المساهمة في الفهم العميق لإبادة الهوية الوطنية عبر الاعتداء الجنسي بسبب أيدولوجية الاحتلال.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Expressions of identity, nationalism, and the nation's efforts to preserve the relevance of the past, both in its present, and in concepts of culture with collective notions have long been linked to the nation's-based recollections of war. One's own identity in conflicts and wars, regardless of their outcome, often determine the continuity of a country's psyche and leave a legacy of sorrow, anguish, and trauma. These wounds are felt in the physical assets of the country, such as its artefacts, buildings and natural scenery, as well as in its psychological or symbolic aspects, such as the identity of the injured person, its ability to heal, and its compassion for the deceased. Upon the elimination of these incentives and any tangible evidence associated with the occupation, intangible scars eventually remain. (Bevan, 2006) The historical symbols and buildings represent a nation's cultural and identity that connects the past and present to the future. According to Thatcher (2018), historic buildings play a vital role in establishing and preserving national identity, they are closely associated with nationalism.

The importance of this study lies in the significant threats that US forces pose to the Iraqi national identity and its culture. By investigating the sexual assaults that the US army practiced in Abu Ghraib against Iraqi mythology and the destruction of the historical buildings, public awareness will be aroused toward the seriousness of losing national identity. By analysing Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad* dramatic text through the lens of cultural genocide, this study aims to examine the role of Iraqi mythology in exposing the US force's intention to annihilate the Iraqi national identity. Through an in-depth analysis of the selected text, this study seeks to reveal US forces adopting of sexual assault as an ideology to demolish the Iraqi national identity and history. By doing so, the

researcher aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the annihilation of national identity via sexual assault due to occupation ideology. In the following section, this research will delve into a close reading of Abu Ghraib scenes, highlighting the sexual assault, torture and degradation practices against the Iraqi mythology that represent Iraqi history and culture. Through this exploration, the researcher seeks to shed light on the Iraqi mythology Ishtar as a representative of Iraqi national identity.

## **2.LITERATURE REVIEW**

In Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad*, the themes of sexual violence, colonial legacies, and national identity intersect in complex ways. This literature review explores recent scholarship that can shed light on these interconnected issues, drawing from works that examine gender-based violence, nationalism, and the Iraqi context specifically. By situating Fadhil's novel within this broader academic discourse, we can better understand how sexual assault has been wielded as a colonial ideology to annihilate national identities, not just in Iraq but across various contexts.

## **3.GENDER, VIOLENCE, and NATIONALISM in IRAQ**

Buffington et al. (2022) directly address the nexus of gender, violence, and nationalism in post-2003 Iraq. Their study analyzes how gender-based violence has been perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, often along sectarian lines, in the context of nation-building efforts. The authors argue that this violence is not merely a by product of conflict but rather a tool to reinforce particular constructions of Iraqi nationalism and identities.

Buffington et al. demonstrate how sexual assault, honor killings, and other forms of gender-based violence have been used to police the boundaries of national belonging and assert dominance over certain groups. For example, they highlight how Sunni and Shia militias have targeted women from opposing sects, using rape as a weapon to degrade and displace them. This violence is framed as a means of "protecting" the nation and reinforcing sectarian identities.

Drawing on this analysis, we can see how Fadhil's novel engages with these dynamics, potentially portraying sexual assault not just as individual trauma but as a deliberate strategy to undermine Iraqi national identity and belonging. The colonial legacy may manifest in the ways such violence echoes historical patterns of oppression and domination.

In *Ishtar in Baghdad*, Fadhil's portrayal of sexual violence could be read as a commentary on the sectarian divides and competing nationalist narratives that have plagued Iraq, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion and occupation. The novel's depiction of women's bodies as sites of violence and oppression may represent the broader assault on Iraqi national identity and sovereignty, as foreign forces and internal conflicts alike have sought to impose their own visions of what it means to be Iraqi. The sexual assaults experienced by Fadhil's characters could symbolize the violation of Iraq's autonomy and the fragmentation of its national identity under the weight of colonial and sectarian agendas.

#### **4.VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN in POLITICS**

While focused on a different regional context, the works of Juliana Restrepo Sanín offer valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of violence and its impacts on women's political participation and national identities.

In her 2020 article, Restrepo Sanín examines violence against women in politics across Latin America, highlighting how it is often rooted in patriarchal norms and misogynistic ideologies. She argues that this violence not only targets individual women but also seeks to reinforce traditional gender roles and exclude women from the public sphere, thereby shaping constructions of national identity and citizenship.

Restrepo Sanín's 2021 piece builds on this, discussing efforts to combat such violence through legal and institutional reforms in Latin American countries. She frames this as a struggle over the very definition of democracy and national values, with women's political participation being a key battleground.

While the geographical context differs, these works offer a useful framework for understanding how gender-based violence like sexual assault can be wielded as a tool to assert particular visions of national identity and belonging, often rooted in patriarchal ideologies. Applying this lens to Fadhil's novel could reveal how the sexual violence depicted may function as a means of excluding certain voices and narratives from the Iraqi national imaginary.

In the context of *Ishtar* in Baghdad, Restrepo Sanín's analysis could shed light on how the sexual assaults portrayed may represent broader efforts to silence and marginalize women's voices and experiences within the Iraqi national narrative. The novel's exploration of trauma and oppression could be seen as a challenge to patriarchal constructions of Iraqi identity, which have traditionally excluded or minimized women's perspectives. By centering the stories of women who have experienced sexual violence, Fadhil may be reclaiming space within the national imaginary for narratives that have been historically suppressed or erased.

#### **5.IRAGI THEATRE: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL and POLITICAL THEMES**

The study by Midhin and Hussein (2023) provides valuable context for understanding the role of Iraqi theatre in grappling with social, political, and environmental issues within the nation's turbulent history. The authors trace how Iraqi theatre was initially bound to propagating the ruling party's political themes prior to 2003, with playwrights unable to challenge the regime's narratives. However, the post-Saddam era has ushered in a tentative shift towards ecological awareness and climate justice within Iraqi theatrical works.

Midhin and Hussein highlight how contemporary Iraqi playwrights like Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri and Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi have begun to explore themes such as water scarcity, environmental degradation, and human rights violations, all framed within a political context that examines the negative impacts of war on the Iraqi people. Their analysis underscores how the relative democracy enjoyed by Iraqis today has enabled playwrights to critique various social and environmental problems afflicting the nation.

This study offers a compelling lens through which to interpret Fadhil's *Ishtar* in Baghdad. Like the playwrights discussed, Fadhil's novel can be seen as part of a broader artistic movement that seeks to confront the complex intersections of political turmoil, environmental injustice, and human rights abuses within the Iraqi context. The sexual violence depicted in the novel may be read not only as a commentary on the fragmentation of national identity but also as a representation of the broader violation of Iraq's land, resources, and people by colonial forces and internal conflicts alike.

Moreover, Midhin and Hussein's emphasis on the power of Iraqi theatre to provide "a voice of humanity and hope, even amidst the continuous tragic circumstances of this long-suffering country" resonates deeply with Fadhil's work. Through her exploration of trauma and oppression, Fadhil may be attempting to reclaim a sense of agency and dignity for those whose stories have been silenced or erased, much like the playwrights who have used their art to resist and challenge dominant narratives.

The studies reviewed here shed light on the complex intersections of gender, violence, nationalism, and environmental justice, providing valuable theoretical grounding for analyzing the themes present in *Ishtar* in Baghdad.

By incorporating the insights from Midhin and Hussein's study, we gain a deeper appreciation for how Fadhil's novel is situated within a broader artistic and intellectual tradition in Iraq that seeks to confront and resist the multifaceted legacies of colonialism, conflict, and environmental degradation. The novel can be seen as part of an evolving cultural movement that aims to reclaim narratives of national identity, human rights, and ecological justice through artistic expression.

Fadhil's depiction of sexual violence may serve as a powerful metaphor for the violation of Iraq's sovereignty, land, and people, echoing the themes explored by contemporary Iraqi playwrights. Her work contributes to the ongoing efforts of artists and intellectuals to document and resist the intersecting forms of oppression and injustice that have shaped the nation's history, while also offering a voice of hope and humanity amidst the tragedy.

## **6. ISHTAR AS A REPRESENTATIVE of IRAQI NATIONAL IDENTITY**

Theatre has benefited from myth throughout history, employing it indicatively or symbolically, or in what are known as visionary circumstances that differ in their treatment of the mythological symbol from creative to functional literary application. Myth's adaptability to different settings opened up new possibilities for its use in theatre for several literary and artistic reasons. It's not unusual for mythological characters to manifest in the modern world, whether as ghosts or physical forms. Prominent examples include Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* (2002), and the subject of this article, Iraqi playwright Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar* in Baghdad (2003). Similar to Churchill and Butler, Fadhil draws these historical characters into the current day to offer commentary on relevant to cultural genocide concerns. In particular, Fadhil brings Tammuz, the god of agriculture and shepherds, back to earth along with his wife the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar who is linked to love, fertility, and war. This is due to Fadhil's concern about the annihilation of the Iraqi cultural identity after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the American-led forces.

Fadhil extracts 'Ishtar' and 'Tammuz' out of the core of their myth and sets them in the occupied Baghdad in 2004. In the first scene, Fadhil highlights the purpose of the US forces to annihilate the Iraqi national identity when Ishtar says "They are destroying my tower, the bridge between heaven and earth!" (40) The historical buildings represent the cultural identity of any country. In this scene, Fadhil employs the tower's destruction by the US army and the way she describes the place with cruel images like 'blood', 'shooting', 'ambulance', 'wounded', and 'cries' to portray the chaos and the destruction of the invasion. Fadhil also employs Ishtar the Iraqi female goddess brilliantly as a metaphor for the national identity. She highlights Abu Ghraib's sexual assault scenes to raise consciousness about the seriousness of the loss of the national identity.

US army uses 'interrogation' to practice torture, sexual assault and physical abuse in Abu Ghraib's prison. In act two, scene three 'naked prisoners' (43) and Tammuz with them as an illustration to the dismantling of the national identity and the humiliation of Iraqi myth, since the US forces looted the ancient Iraqi remains. The abuse and degradation via leash that US army practiced on Tammuz symbolize the American insulting to the Iraqi historical symbols. Moreover, the 'Lion of Babylon exercise' (42) in the text is a clear image to the looting and their knowledge about Iraq's culture. Emberling and Gibson (2008) asserted that the looting of the Iraqi national museum was under the protection of the US army. Another evidence that reveals the US intention to denationalize Iraq from its national identity in act two scene one, when the officer asked Tammuz about his home and the later replied 'in heaven'. The officer replied 'Aren't you leave anything to us! Heaven, earth and oil!' (43) The officer inquiry reveals their intention to loot and destruct as well as to cause chaos under the claim of democracy and liberation.

Fadhil concentrates on Ishtar as an Iraqi sacred goddess particularly to demonstrate the importance of Iraqi woman as a symbol of strength and sacrifice. In the text, Ishtar acts as a leader who inspects his people and she looks for Tammuz fearlessly among US soldiers. According to the Sumerian incantation hymn Ishtar notifies 'I am a woman (but) verily I am an exuberant man'. (Cohen, 1975, 17, trans) Ishtar represents a strong woman with masculine figure, and she knows the role of each figure according to the situation. Therefore, Ishtar represents the national identity as well as the cultural history of Iraq. Edling (2016) concluded that if done systematically, efforts to eradicate a group's unique identity as well as the physical destruction of cultural artefacts should be regarded as acts of cultural genocide. Lemkin (1933) discussed that:

Barbarity, conceived as oppressive and destructive acts directed against individuals as members of a national, religious, or racial group, and the crime of vandalism, conceived as malicious destruction of works of art and culture because they represent the specific creations of the genius of such groups. (91)

US forces brutal practices in Abu Ghraib demonstrate precisely their intentional destruction to Iraq's cultural heritage as well as their denationalization of its national identity. In act two scene four when the officer interrogated Ishtar with striking her repeatedly about her mission and she replied that to rebirth people who have lost their lives due to US forces weapons. She declares again 'I am the goddess of heaven.' (45) The officer answered her sarcastically that they will return her back to heaven which an

illustration to the destruction. Moreover, the 'dog cage' in scene three, when the officer asked Tammuz to bark like a dog after he whistles but Tammuz rejected and the officer asked the soldier to drag him to the dog cage. Furthermore, the sexual assault that is practiced as an ideology of cultural annihilation against Ishtar and Tammuz. In addition to demolish education in Iraq when Ishtar asked the child in act one scene two about who has torn her school bag. Also, the woman who lost her son in the explosion and his bag has burnt when he went to school. All these scenes expose the American reality that is to keep Iraq without past, present and future as well as national identity.

Fadhil's adaptation of Abu Ghraib incidents in her text is to visualize the seriousness of the cultural heritage destruction due to occupation by US, UK and other countries. Stone (2005) argued that prior to the US invasion and illegally occupied Iraq in 2003, archaeologists from the invading nations mobilized out of concern that the war would destroy Iraq's ancient artefacts. Lists of the places and their coordinates were sent to the Pentagon and the UK Ministry of Defence; the UK House of Lords was contacted as well with inquiries about the Iraq's cultural heritage. Al-Hussainy and Matthews (2008) concluded that we may say that Iraq's cultural and archaeological heritages are facing their worst-ever catastrophe. The physical remnants of Iraq's historically significant history were roughly safe and undisturbed until the middle of the nineteenth century AD, when western explorers starting in the 1840s severely damaged them. US forces loot and destruct most of the remains via the cooperation of UK and countries who took part in the invasion. US brutal practices in Abu Ghraib later expose their false claim and manipulating propaganda that they came as liberator to set democracy. Their tools of democracy were looting, destruction, killing, violation and abusing sexually.

In the act three scene one where Tammuz is naked and his head is covered with hood by the soldier. The nakedness can be regarded as an abstraction to Iraq's cultural heritage as well as to its richness since Tammuz is the god of fertility. While sexual assault against Ishtar is an embodiment of Iraq's national identity that is violated and annihilated by the US forces. The dialogue between Ishtar and Tammuz demonstrates the cultural genocide act when Tammuz said to Ishtar that they came to the wrong address and this is not their land. While Ishtar agreed with him that 'Our dynasty is overthrown, conquered by those who are armed with death.' (48) Their dialogue symbolizes the looting act that invasion countries have practiced in Iraq, Germany among them who confiscated Iraq's antiques and Ishtar gate. Bilsel (2003) confirmed that Iraq appealed to the Germany government to give back the Iraqi artefacts and Ishtar gate is one of them.

Snow (2022) asserted that the cultural genocide that is Iraq faced after 2003 is the outcome of US invasion, for instance The Northwest Palace of Nimrud was totally destroyed by ISIS in 2015, along with the famous reliefs that were located all over the structure. As a result, US invasion opened the hell's gate to Iraq's nation, culture and history as well as the destruction in all its parts. Their brutal practices, sexual assault as an ideology to plant the seeds of chaos, trauma, and cultural genocide that is practised by different groups as an outcome of the occupation.

## 7.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the significant threats that US forces pose to the Iraqi national identity and its culture in Fadhil text drama. Through investigating the sexual assaults that the US army practiced in Abu Ghraib against Iraqi mythology and the destruction of the historical buildings, public awareness will be aroused toward the seriousness of losing national identity. Throughout history, occupation troops have used a variety of tactics to increase their power and denationalize countries. One of these tactics for the destruction and erasure of national cultural identity is sexual assault. by destroying and pilfering ancient structures, antiques, and especially historical buildings. Since sexual assault is utilized as an ideology to further political objectives, the study exposes the ideologically motivated malignancy of the occupation troops. Additionally, the paper highlights the long-term cultural damage caused by many groves as a result of US colonization. The study's conclusions highlight the need of cultural artefact preservation, protection, and appreciation. The findings emphasize how crucial it is to treat sexual assault as a new colonization ideology during wartime or colonization. A country can strive towards rebuilding and reclaiming its national identity and fostering cultural pride by questioning this theology.

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