

## **On becoming a poet**

Amal al-Jubouri

My life in Iraq is completely mixed with politics, from the day that I was born. Consider the year of my birth – 1967, the year of the Arab-Israeli war.

The beginning of my journey to have a critical voice came in 1984, at the age of 17, when I was called in for interrogation by the representatives of the Ba'ath regime. A very well-known poet, a man whom I regarded as a colleague, a poet of my own generation, recorded conversations with me and reported me to the dictator Saddam Hussein. This is a long story which I shall tell in detail on a future occasion, not now.

So when I start writing I do not think of being a woman or a man. I am thinking only as a human being, a human being who wants to scream, through writing, to become free from fear. Writing is a kind of liberation or healing, and I have come to feel this more and more. Poetry was and still is my genuine healer.

After I was interrogated by Saddam's officers, on several occasions I tried to end my life. But I failed. I thought that committing suicide would be a way of ending my fear, because after that incident fear was the absolute master of my daily life. I was a young girl at the time, and that incident was way beyond my mental capacity to deal with it.

I was writing. Suicide failed. I was rescued several times. During this journey of survival, I was writing and writing because I did not dare to tell the story of what had happened to me to anybody, not even to my own family. I gave them hints, but not the full story, because fear was everywhere, and fear was the regime's main tool for suppressing the people.

If you feel such a fear, even human dignity goes missing. So I was searching through writing which is called poetry, for my refuge, my security, my peace of mind, and my liberation from this world.

People refer to our generation as "the '80s generation" or "the war poets". Of course we grew up just witnessing war and living in the middle of conflicts, but each conflict was different. The Iran-Iraq War; the Iraqi-Kuwait War; the Second Gulf War; and then the embargo and the American occupation in 2003. What was common to them all was the human suffering, and the peak of that suffering, which is the loss of your beloved ones. It is not a replaceable thing when you lose someone forever. During the Iran-Iraq war we were under heavy propaganda from the regime. They were calling for an Iraqi identity for us... all of us were supposedly descendants of the great Mesopotamia, and we were all Arabs. We had to stand to defend our country from Iranian attempts to invade it and destroy it. That was the narrative of the war at that time.

I was very young, not even 14 years old, when the war started, and this nationalism and patriotism also affected me and my generation. However I was very lucky, because I did not publish any collection of poetry at that time. My first and only collection, published in 1986, *The Wine of Wounds*, was a personal scream; although I put it in the frame of the cry of humanity. It was my story, my suffering. I did not put out any collection of poetry comparable to my generation. I was involved in journalism, so of course I did write about the war, but from a different angle. At that time I was involved heavily in publishing my Arabic translation of modern English poetry, as an ongoing series in the newspaper. We were focused on the "humanity side" of the war. Now, of course, many years down the line, I see all wars as the fundamental, most cruel and crazy solutions to any conflict, because I have experienced many wars and restrictions, repression and oppression, and I

know that the only ones who pay the price are the innocents, the civilians, while the politicians sit and do deals with the enemy.

When I started writing poetry, I was writing of my personal crisis at that time. Then, after also losing my uncle in 1984 (he was disappeared in Baghdad) and after my interrogation, I discovered that I was just trying to heal myself. So I started to read translated poetry, because I found it very simple and much more relevant, not like classical Arabic poetry, which – especially the pre-Islamic poetry – is very difficult, although at the same time it is very powerful. But I also read al-Mutanabbi. For me he was like a godfather! Many of his verses have become proverbs, expressions of wisdom, lessons from life applicable to each part of the world, regardless to ethnicity or East or West. So I liked the poetry of al-Mutanabbi. I also liked the exiled poet Sa'adi Yusuf. He was exiled because he was from the communist party. I connected with any powerful poetry that was committed to resistance and fighting against fear, and for justice and freedom, because that reflected my personal experience. Al-Mutanabbi was targeted by other poets, who reported him to the Khalifa, and that was exactly what I had faced – not the same in details, but I was targeted by one of my closest poet colleagues. It seems that this culture of betrayal is traditionally inherited in our society, especially in the circles of the so-called “elites”. So Mutanabbi's experience with cultural figures who were going to the dictator or the *khalifa* to report him was a kind of parallelism of my same experience.

So I did not publish anything and focused on journalism, though I was writing some poetry. Luckily in 1994 after the war and the uprising in 1991, I wrote the collection *Oh words, set me free!*. I had not decided to publish this book. At that time I was going to the house of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra the great Arab Iraqi of Palestinian origin. Every time I went to his house and recited some new poems he would keep a copy of these texts in his house. One day he called me on the phone and started reading “Amal al-Juburi is the new Emily Dickinson and Emily Brontë in the new Arabic Poetry” (not only Iraqi, but also Arabic!). I was very surprised and happy, and he told me: “This is the introduction for your new book.” So that was included in the introduction to my second collection *Oh words, set me free!*, which was published in Amman in 1994 with his support and with his endorsement.

I was very down with what happened after the destructiveness of the war in 1991, the withdrawal of the Iraqi military who were massacred by the leadership of Saddam Hussein and by the American bombing, killing Iraqi soldiers and burying them alive, bombing every city in Iraq, especially my own city of Baghdad. I also lost my father at the same time that the war started, and during the war I lost my nephew. Then came the uprising, and its aftermath, the mass graves of the Ba'ath regime. All in all it was another turning point in my life, and I expressed that in my second collection, especially in the last very long poem *Karbala'*, where I compared the uprising in 1991, which was a popular rising started by the people after the defeat of the Iraqi army, with the famous historical battle which involved the Shi'a Imam Husayn.

So in my second collection you see the cursing, the lamenting, against war. I consider all wars as a big mistake, the root of all violence and hate in this world. There is not a single war that is done for the sake of peace or prosperity, or for humanity. All wars are the destruction of our humanity.

I write in the style of *qasidat al-nathr* (prose poetry), because I feel more free with it and I don't need to restrain my thought to fit with the format. Poetry for me is freedom, journey and refuge, and a place where I feel free, but with dignity, where I feel secure and safe. Poetry never betrayed me and it never will. However, the freedom of poetry is also a dangerous and very scary freedom, because you expose yourself to the Others, and once you publish the text, it is not yours any more. Everybody puts you on the autopsy table and make their own interpretation. Sometimes it is relevant to your own thoughts, concerns and ideas, but sometimes it is a completely different version of what you intended to say.

The figure of the woman Hagar figures strongly in my writings of that period. If I look back now at the whole *Hagar* collection, I find it very heavy and pessimistic. There is no hope at all! Now when I read this book I feel suffocated because there is not a single sign of hope there. I wrote it when I was down; it was not only me but was the whole Iraqi nation, if such a thing as an Iraqi nation still exists. I rewrote the calamity, the catastrophes, the humanitarian crises, the aftermath of 2003... I wrote these poems when beheaded bodies were being thrown into the Tigris during the sectarian civil violence; the families of the victims were searching for the heads of their beloved sons or husbands. It was not easy... even to think of any sign of light at the end of the mess of both the American occupation, the heavy inheritance of the former regime, and the selfish new political Iraqi elites. We citizens were and are still the only people who paid – and are still paying – a heavy, bloody price.

After 2014 I realised that in this misfortune there must be a good fortune. Then Hagar became more powerful (though she was powerful in my book anyway). But there is much hope in the new generation, especially after the occupation of Mosul and other cities by ISIS.

From the mass displacement, the collective destruction, and the irreplaceable loss of innocent Iraqis, there arose a new movement in Iraq, the volunteer groups who helped the Iraqi displaced, standing with them and transcending all sectarian and ethnic identities and united a single, human, Iraqi identity.

At the same time, Hagar stays abandoned. When I went to districts such as Salah al-Din, I saw many mothers and wives who had lost their men during the ISIS crisis in 2014. I saw them abandoned: they had no voice because there was no solidarity, neither inside Iraq nor outside Iraq. ISIS has been identified through deformed narratives, so those women are suffering doubly: on the one hand they lost their men; and till now their fates are unknown. So yes, in those areas Hagar is still abandoned and suffering, and nobody recognises her suffering. But when you go to the Yazidi territories, you find out that the Yazidis have changed the narrative of the rapes. In Iraq, even if the woman is a victim, our society does not accept her, and the women victims would be killed by their families. But now during the enslavement by ISIS of the Yazidi community, the women, with the help of the international community, are creating awareness with a human rights campaign. Everything has changed. Even the high religious authorities of the Yazidi community issued a *fatwa* welcoming the survivors of the enslavement. So the Hagar of the Yazidis version is now empowered. She has a voice, like Nadia Murad and Layla Taalo, coming out of the thousands of survivors... So we have two kinds of Hagar. This is never mentioned, in the West.

There is so much more to say, but it will have to wait for another day. At the present time I am in Iraq, trying to see how a poet might be useful in the current situation. It is a good time to reflect. I think, looking back, that I would say that I am a poet of losses. So much loss...

1 October 2020