

Beyond Autobiography

Under the Sign of Destruction: the First-Person Narrator in Alia Mamdouh's novel *Naphtalene*

Verena Klemm

Umm Suturi emptied the bowls of hot water over my head, and soap went from hand to hand among my aunts. They rubbed and twisted my braids. I died among these women's fingers; my eyes were blinded by the soap lather. Aunt Najia clutched my thigh as if she were holding a chicken leg. My aunt sighed and leaned over her knee, her breasts putting me into a stupor. The soap, steam, and all that noise; I was an egg thrown into the ocean. I was moved from one lap to another and I saw.

In *Naphtalene*, the Iraqi author Alia Mamdouh describes life in 1950s Baghdad, as seen through the eyes of a young girl called Huda. With tremendous poetic vividness, the novel follows her through childhood until she is about fourteen, amidst her extended family and neighbors in a traditional residential district in the heart of the city. A number of graphic scenes reveal the tyrannical nature of her father, a choleric police officer who is addicted to alcohol. Despite this destructive atmosphere, powerful episodes of female sensuality, passion and aggression abound. Relationships between the women, but also those between the children in the family and the neighborhood, are shown to be intensive and often tender and erotic. At times they even transgress the boundary to the illicit.

Huda tells of the people and spaces of her childhood, which she has harbored deep in her memory, as if she wanted to preserve them from annihilation and corrosion with "mothballs". The title *Naphtalene* – a hydrocarbon whose vapor is used as a household fumigant, as in mothballs protecting textiles – names the function of the novel, as a medium for protecting personal remembrance from being consigned to oblivion. It simultaneously evokes the association of the sweet and artificial odor whose small round pellets are a product of the petroleum industry. And so the title also refers to Iraq, which for the author is inseparably tied to the intense, often sensual, emotional experiences of her childhood in Baghdad. *Naphtalene* is not, however, an autobiography: beyond the biographical parallels, the figure of Huda, who tells of love, hate and great pain, is a mirror image for many girls in this city. This is a novel in which the personal merges with the collective.

Multiple partings from Baghdad

Alia Mamdouh was born in Baghdad in 1944. Like numerous other Arab writers of her generation, her biography reveals a "broken line": frequent breaks and new departures; a nomadic existence characterized by migration; loss of her home country and exile. In the 1960s, still full of idealism, she shared the values implied by "literary commitment" with a loose movement of progressive Arab writers and intellectuals. They sought to show the young nations that were emerging from colonial domination a path towards political freedom, modernity and a pluralistic and humane society. Many gradually lost even the semblance of idealism as the Middle East slid into violence. Losing all hope in the oppressive climate of violence, repression and censorship, Alia Mamdouh eventually left the Middle East; to the present day she does not know if she will ever return.

Her first parting from Baghdad was motivated by personal rather than political reasons. Aged twenty, she defied the wishes of her family to follow her lover, a much older, married journalist, to Beirut. She had already published a small novel under a pseudonym. Her father, like Huda's a police officer, had died a few years before. A well-read man with an extensive library of his own, he had sparked in his daughter an interest in both Oriental and Western literature. He also sought to prevent her from writing, even resorting to threats of violence. Alia Mamdouh had been separated from her mother early in life. After her husband divorced her, she was forced to return to her Syrian hometown of Aleppo without her two children and seriously ill with tuberculosis. She died there just a few years later. After the death of her father, Mamdouh managed to persuade her conservative grandmother that she could finance her school education by taking a job, and started to work for a newspaper.

After she had begun a new life in Beirut with her lover, who was a supporter of the pan-Arab Ba'th Party that was being persecuted by the Communist regime in Iraq, she had a sobering, harrowing experience: just like her father before him, her new husband now tried to prevent her from writing by threatening violence.

They returned to Baghdad with their son in 1968 when the Ba'thists seized power in a putsch. There, she worked at a newspaper founded by her husband and completed a degree in psychology. During these years her husband married a third and then a fourth woman. He allowed her to move back to Beirut with their son at the beginning of the 1970s. Shortly before, Saddam Hussein had claimed the leadership of the Ba'thist regime in Iraq.

In the Lebanese capital, a bastion of freedom and vitality that attracted journalists and intellectuals from all over the Arab world, the young Iraqi was at last able to nurture and express her creativity. She wrote for the feuilletons of various renowned newspapers and cultural magazines and published two collections of

short stories. She remained politically independent amidst the ideological hothouse atmosphere of these years, and left the country upon the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. Returning to Baghdad, she became the editor-in-chief of the journal *al-Rasid*. She was finally able to divorce during this period.

In 1982 she left Baghdad once again – this time perhaps forever. Her position under the unrelenting pressure exerted by the censorship authorities in Saddam Hussein's regime was awkward and difficult, but this was not the immediate reason for her departure. What concerned her most was her son's impending drafting into active military service during the Iran-Iraq War. She chose to move with her son to Rabat in Morocco. Although she soon gained a reputation there for her work as a cultural journalist and was networked with critically minded intellectuals and writers throughout the Arab world, at the beginning of the 1990s she moved to Europe, settling first in London and then in Paris. There she was a Guest Fellow in 2001 and 2002 at the Centre George Pompidou as part of the "Cities of Asylum" program for persecuted and exiled writers, run by the European Parliament of Writers. Alia Mamdouh continues to live and work in the French capital, which is one of the main centers of exiled journalists and writers from the Arab world.

As a journalist and editor, Mamdouh has always been critical of any form of ideology and authority. She is well known for her intelligent and blunt observations of Arab intellectual and literary life as well as of East-West relations in culture and politics. Since 1981 she has published four novels, in which she presents her critical stance on power and culture, interwoven with an appeal for human creativity and freedom.

Huda and her world

Naphtalene is Alia Mamdouh's second autobiographically inspired novel, a work that established her literary reputation in the Arab world and a little later in Europe. Woven into a closely meshed and dynamic network of relationships made up of women and children, Huda is known locally as a "little monster". She relates her experiences of how the overriding patriarchal system seeks to dominate life in family and neighborhood circles. The main representative of the powerful and violent male authority is the father. At the end of the novel, the state assumes his destructive role.

The novel describes the old town neighborhood from Huda's eyes, which slowly widens as she gets older: her first, small world is the multi-storied building with a seemingly vast inner courtyard at its center. Nearby are other courtyards, the coffeehouse, the butcher shop, the bakery and cook-shop; a bit further away the Abu-Hanifa mosque, the local primary school and the broad Tigris, with promenades and parks along its banks. The alleyways and narrow streets between

the apartment blocks and the souk are the stamping ground of the men who go about their business, drink tea, and play tricktrack. Women move in between this male activity and its terrain, some walking briskly, some ponderously, cloaked in their *abayas* (an over-garment covering the whole body). Many of the younger women appear chic and colorful, while scores of older women, obviously trying hard to seem chaste and virtuous or even invisible, wear dark, nondescript colors and yashmaks. Girls and boys are on the move in their school uniforms, sent on errands to do the shopping, or playing in the Tigris gardens in small mixed gangs.

The family sphere is in the apartment building, the inner courtyard and the roof terrace. This is where Huda lives, with her younger brother Adil; her mother, who suffers from a lung disease; Aunty Farida, a beauty who hopes to get married soon; and Aunty Najia, who may have been "passed over" and remained single but is nonetheless a strong female character in her best years. Whenever the male head, Huda's father, is absent, the grandmother is the mistress of the family. As his mother, she is the only woman whose opinion he listens to and at times respects.

This grandmother was the center of the circle. I do not know where she concealed her strength. When she walked her footsteps were light and hardly audible. When she spoke, her voice was clothed in caution and patience, and when she was silent everyone was bewildered by her unannounced plans. She was strong without showing signs of it, mighty without raising her voice, beautiful without finery. She was beautiful from her modest hem to her silver braids. She was slim, of medium height, a narrow black band round her head, whose ends dangled by her thin braids. She was light-skinned. I never saw anyone with a white complexion like hers. It was a white between bubbly milk and thick cream. Her eyes were gray with dark blue, wild green, and pure honey-colored rays.

When we saw her in the morning as we got ready for school, they were honey-colored, and by the time we came home in the afternoon they were blue. But at night they were gray. She was a well-organized woman; she loved justice and set great store by it. She rebuked my father and scolded him behind our backs, suddenly setting upon him, taking all her time, scattering him and tearing him apart, exposing him anew to us.

A career-driven police officer stationed in Kerbala prison, at first Huda's father returns regularly to the family in Baghdad. The visits soon become sporadic though: he has married another woman and moved in with her and their newborn son. When he does return to Baghdad, the whole family is exposed to his domineering whims. Even the grandmother's influence dwindles. No amount of begging can help as the patriarch casts out his first wife, Huda's mother, due to her debilitating

illness and sends her back to distant Syria, all alone. She dies there soon after, far away from her two children.

At this stage the old town quarter is still Huda's only world; a life elsewhere is unimaginable. As an adolescent, restrictions are imposed on what she is allowed to do; she is controlled by a strict traditional family and conventions. Despite this authoritarian upbringing, in the eyes of many people in the neighborhood she is a beastly little rascal, cheeky with an unseemly tendency towards impertinence and obstinacy. These characteristics seem to be nourished by a still subconscious need for self-preservation within the constrictive grip of a collective entity. But in many respects Huda is a young girl like any other in Baghdad at that time: she goes to school, gladly skips it and does so often, is always involved when her gang meets to play or there is a quarrel. She develops a crush on a boy called Mahmoud. Her father beats her in a fit of temper whenever he has even the faintest inkling of glances and contact. Sometimes a dramatic event ruptures the continuum of everyday life: the cruel disowning of the mother; later on, the news of her death during Aunt Farida's wedding celebrations and the panic it triggers in Huda, who then runs off to the Abu-Hanifa mosque. There, the traumatized child tries to disappear into the anonymous crowd solemnly celebrating the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan, hoping never to have to return home. Another episode that breaks the routine is the trip to the Shiite pilgrim site of Kerbala with her brother, grandmother and aunties. While the women circle the shrine of the martyr Husayn fervently wailing, praying, and beseeching, the two children are sent to the nearby prison, where the father, decorated with service medals but increasingly wrecked by alcohol and self-pity, works as a senior officer. Once there they plead with him on behalf of their grandmother to come back home. Towards the end of the novel, his ambitions to gain promotion having come to nothing, the father is seized by a fit of rage. Consumed by anger and frustration, he burns his uniform and medals and is immediately suspended from state service.

From I to you

The narrative voice in *Naphtalene* describes Huda's narrow world in a sober, objective tone. Neither concern nor emotion are aroused despite the lasting pain caused by the father's cold-heartedness and brutality; nor is there any sense of nostalgia when describing the tiny perishing neighborhood, whose residents are ultimately forced by the government to move out of the old buildings and relocate to other areas of the city. Throughout the novel, the distance between the narrator (now, of course, far older) and the young Huda is discernible only occasionally, for instance when the narrative voice switches subtly from "I" to "you", as if entering into an intimate soliloquy:

My tears did not flow. They found a different way of expressing themselves, and they held themselves back.

I did not stay long. When they left, when they took their suitcases and dreams, when they took all the streets, those things would be the only things that had power over you. I slammed the door behind me and went out.

It thus seems that Huda, the narrator, faces herself as a child and, at the very same moment, looks out at the world through the eyes of this same child. Perhaps with this contradictory narrative situation she is tracing the shifting counters of her own relationship to the protagonist: at times the original unity of self, space and time, which the novel strives to recapture through intensive acts of memory, is disturbed by an awareness of the unbridgeable gap to her present, cleaved open by the march of time and the disappearance of the world of her childhood.

The sensual and ambivalent female spaces

Huda's inner strength is nurtured by her untamable emotional and erotic needs in a milieu that is set on social and physical domestication. Her need for love and affection from her closest relatives, in particular her younger brother, is reflected in scenes of complete mutual trust, tenderness and care. Her awakening sexuality leads her to observe and experience with enormous curiosity the form, texture and functions of the female body when it is briefly liberated from social and religious constraints in the hammam. The homoerotic scenes between the young aunts are observed with the same detailed interest and impartiality as Aunty Farida's outburst of sexualized fury: having waited vainly for her husband since their wedding day, upon his entering unexpectedly she rips off his trousers and proceeds to thrash, berate and sexually humiliate him, full of pent-up anger and frustration.

Alia Mamdouh once characterized herself as a "writer of the sensual." In early life, caught in the oppressive confines of her family, her own body was her only refuge and her imagination the power capable of overcoming such hurdles and penetrating to the prohibited and tabooed: "That was where I placed my reliance as I moved toward maturity." For Mamdouh, the sensual is a "secret language" within Arabic; sensuality and poetic language extend and amplify inner worlds, bring people together, surmount their limits and antagonisms. The act of formulating this language overcomes the literary dictates and straitjackets which often characterized the didactic style of the social realism of the 1960s and 1970s.

In *Naphtalene*, Mamdouh's "secret language" leads into spaces that are the domain of women. These are not only the exotic and erotic realms conjured by the Western imagination: violence and suffering are very prevalent. Huda's narrative shows that these spaces occupied by women are in fact interstices, spaces limited

and dominated by the male sphere of power. They have a double character: men have no permanent place there, because they do not live together with the women and children; they are sporadic intruders who continually and lastingly demonstrate their authority. The patriarchal order, represented by the grandmother, is mirrored in the female hierarchy as well as in the roles and status assigned to boys and girls. The grandmother undertakes nothing fundamental to challenge the authority of her son, whereby she ultimately stabilizes his role, as is evident in Huda's description quoted above. At the same time, she responds to his neurotic outbreaks of violence, consoling and protecting the family. She tells stories and so nurtures Huda's and Adil's fantasy lives. And while she incessantly recites religious phrases of forgiveness and repelling evil, she turns a blind eye to the erotic playfulness and escapades of the sensual aunties whose deepest desires remain unsatisfied. These women's spaces can be spheres of feminine personalities and bodies as well as sites of sensuality, sexuality and subversion. Symbolically, and sometimes in reality, male violence is nonetheless present in these spaces. Its impact on the bodies and psyches of the women and children is devastating.

A postmodern "secret language"

Alia Mamdouh's "secret language" of sensuality is part of a polyphonic literary current that seeks to shake the foundations of patriarchal and nationalist chauvinism in Arab states, societies and families through postmodernist and deconstructionist writing strategies. The authors who have set in motion this current are of the same generation. Like her, they have lived through the wars and the social upheaval and fragmentation that punctuate the history of the Middle East. After many years of postcolonial hope and literary commitment, they have learnt to distrust all ideology and official rhetoric. They also reject authoritarian Arab-Islamic traditions reverting to either open or veiled violence. The failure of earlier political and human hope and goals is shocking and painful for all those who shared these ideals and actively supported their realization during the climate of a new beginning that gripped the young Arab states. Their disillusionment, their profound distrust towards the nation and its dominant culture are something they share with numerous younger authors, who have themselves experienced political and social upheaval, violence, alienation and exile.

One particular characteristic of postmodern Arab literature is its humanist orientation. For this reason, the writers belonging to this current are known as the "new Arab humanists", a category that helps to distinguish them from the social realists of the postcolonial phase. Amidst the violent and authoritarian reality of the Middle East, these authors link their literary practice to approaches critical of society and culture, which they position and express beyond the framework of

political ideologies. Their work often focuses on a powerless, isolated individual. What they reveal and analyze are the sources and destructive impact of the authoritarian forces and structures as embodied in the subject. The unrivalled forerunner of this literary focus was the Lebanese author Layla Ba'albaki. Fascinated by Simone de Beauvoir, as early as 1958 she portrayed the existential foundering of a female protagonist in conflict with family and social constraints in her novel *I Live*. Ba'albaki and her literary successors exposed in a single move that both the fathers and other male heroes – such as the leftwing nationalist committed intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s, who were idealized and paid court to by progressive circles – were no more than loudmouthed weaklings with a propensity to violence.

The first-person narrator in the Arab context

The deconstruction of hegemonic political and social values often entails the use of the first-person narrator in Arab literature. Interweaving autobiographical with fictional strands, the first-person narrator has become a popular narrative form amongst critical female and male authors. In the Arab and Islamic contexts, focusing on the individual is itself a statement challenging the idealized collective entity of the religious community, the modern nation or the family. It is precisely in this sense that the first-person narrator is for Mamdouh a narrative device,

a manner of putting myself in opposition to all, in the face of unjust ideas and iniquitous laws that were threatening my individuality – and my very existence – first and foremost as a female who was trying to undo and redo her relationship to the self, and then pushing it to the ultimate endpoint, to exercise a will that still has not diminished, the will to rebel.

Because the first person form concentrates on the individual's inward ponderings and any emotional damage that has been suffered, it is linked with an analysis of the open and veiled potentials for violence in religion, tradition, society and politics. This is characteristic of a number of novels written during or after the civil war in Lebanon, which in their retelling of first-hand experiences reveal a "history imprinted on the body." Of particular importance here are the authors Hanan al-Shaykh, Elias Khoury and Rashid al-Daif. Taking the ambivalent world of women as the central narrative space, the strategy pursued in *Naphthalene* and similar novels by the young Egyptian writer Miral al-Tahawi explore the slow but relentless process whereby the body and soul of a woman are tamed by structural and physical patriarchal violence, a repression that extends to mutilation. In al-Tahawi's work women are the hub of the world. More radical than Mamdouh, she breaks the conventional mould that was used to represent

gender conflict in the 1960s and 1970s in committed Arab "feminist literature". In their efforts to achieve a credible "realism", these authors had mirrored the unjust divisions fissuring the social world, inadvertently bypassing any disclosure of the structural and symbolic centers of power. In al-Tahawi's novel *The Tent* (1996), set among Bedouins who have settled down in mainstream society, the outside world dominated by men is complemented by an autonomous female cosmos organized around a matriarch. As in *Naphtalene*, the grandmother, in the shadow of the mostly absent father, possesses the unchallenged authority. However, through maliciousness, envy and superstition al-Tahawi's grandmother figure drives her daughter-in-law, who gives birth to only "jinxing" girls, to social and psychological ruin. At the same time, the old Bedouin woman avenges the patriarchal society, for herself at least, by gaining autarchy over the female members of the family, which she wields mercilessly.

Beyond autobiography

With this concentration on the damaged self, which goes hand in hand with disclosing veiled sources and centers of power, the aforementioned authors move in a terrain that is far from the genre of autobiography, which has been a popular form of literary self-expression in the Arab world for decades.

Mamdouh's novel thus lacks the element decisive for an autobiography – credible, unmistakable authenticity and identity. Undoubtedly her protagonist Huda reflects the young girl growing up that she once was. Traits evident in other characters, too, are most likely gleaned from key persons of her own childhood world. Nonetheless, it seems that the real merges fluidly with the fictive in the literary rendering of Huda and all the people of her neighborhood; there are no autobiographical references to the depiction of concrete characters in the novel.

Another aspect running counter to what could be expected from an autobiography by Alia Mamdouh is that *Naphtalene* eschews plotting a continuous and ultimately successful path to an autonomous self. The novel leaves in abeyance the question of whether the narrator's will to assert herself, which saves her from total submission in her childhood and adolescent years, in fact leads to this goal. At the end of the novel, as the truck, loaded with household and personal effects, the grandmother, aunts and children, is leaving the neighborhood (which is about to be demolished), Huda knows of no-one whom she could wave goodbye to. The union between the families of the old town quarter, in whose female and childhood spheres she was protected and loved, has dissolved forever. As the truck moves from the old to the new district, Huda compares the lives of the people riding on the loading area to a trail of blood that stretches back behind them relentlessly.

This metaphor suggests an understanding of the figures as a community of fate and thus displaces an autobiographical historical outlook on what the future might hold for Huda and her family.

In Huda, Mamdouh develops a literary figure that moves beyond autobiographical congruity with herself. "The personal pronoun 'I,' the author once said, "is not an autobiographical confession for me. It is a convergence of the self with the other." In this sense, Huda's "I" does not harbor or express a distinctive, singular individual but is rather fashioned out of a synthesis of various, tightly interwoven life stories. The literary individual is a connecting "I" in whom the life and stories of a myriad of other people living in the Baghdad of the 1950s are captured – "women who suffered like I did," as the author confirms. Through this integrating and unifying usage of the first-person form *Naphtalene* may be understood as a "poly-biography" of victims in the face of violence.

In Alia Mamdouh's "secret language", a vision unfolds for writing a new self. This new self has surmounted the fixed limits of an autobiographically constituted identity. In this way, the painful failure of solidarity that the author has experienced in the course of her life within the social, political, and cultural spheres of the Arab world can be set in relationship to her literary search for the self, which itself interconnects people. In *Naphtalene* Mamdouh configures the community of the individual with others under the foreboding sign of omnipresent and powerful forces of destruction. The literary creation of the narrator's poly-biographical "I" leads the isolated, exiled individual back into a symbolic form of community that it has lost amidst the social and political reality of the Middle East.

WORKS

Layla wa-l-dhi'b (Layla and the Wolf), Baghdad: Dar al-Hurriyya 1981

Habbat al-naftalin (Naphtalene), Cairo: al-Hai'a al-Misriyya li-l-Kitab 1986; Beirut: Dar al-Adab 2000

al-Wala' (The Passion), Beirut: Dar al-Adab 1995

al-Ghulama (The Girl Who Lived Like a Boy), Beirut: Dar al-Saqi 2000

al-Mahbubat (The Loved Ones), Beirut: Dar al-Saqi 2003

TRANSLATIONS

The Loved Ones, trans. Marilyn Booth, London, Beirut: Saqi 2003

Naphtalene. A Novel of Baghdad, trans. Peter Theroux, foreword by Hélène Cixous, afterword by F.A. Haidar, New York: Feminist Press at CUNY 2005

FURTHER READING

- Farida Abu-Haidar: "A Voice from Iraq: The Fiction of Alia Mamdouh", in: *Women. A Cultural Review* 9 (1998), pp. 305-11
- Abir Hamda: "Marriage, Madness and Murder in Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* and Salwa Bakr's *Golden Chariot*", in: *Raida* 18/19 (2001), pp. 47-9
- Alia Mamdouh: "Creatures of Arab Fear", in: Fadia Faqir (ed.), *In the House of Silence. Autobiographical Texts by Arab Women Writers*, Reading: Garnet 1998, pp. 63-71
- "A secret language has formed inside of the Arabic language. Conversation between Alia Mamdouh and Mona Chollet", in: *Autodafe* 2 (autumn 2001) (publication of the International Parliament of Writers)
- Alia Mamdouh: "Baghdad: These Cities Dying in our Arms," in: Jocelyn Burell (ed.), *Word. On Being a [Woman] Writer*, New York: Feminist Press 2004, 5. 38-48
- Alia Mamdouh: "Interview", in: European Cultural Foundation (ed.), *Remembering for tomorrow*, pp. 55-58, <http://www.uclm.es/escueladetradoctores/pdf/bookingles.pdf> (access June 9, 2007)

OTHER WORKS CITED

- Layla Ba'albaki: *Ana abya*, Beirut: Dar Majallat Shi'r 1958
- Miral al-Tahawi: *al-Khiba'*. Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat 1996 (English translation: *The Tent*, trans. Anthony Calderbank, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 1998)