

Jawad Al-Assadi's *Women in War: Troubling, Troubled and Troublesome Female Refugees*



**Jawad Al-Assadi's *Women in War:*
Troubling, Troubled
and Troublesome Female Refugees By
Hadeel Abdelhameed**

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Women in War (first published in 2003) is a play written by the Iraqi playwright Jawad Al-Assadi which concerns the dilemma of Arab female refugees who in turn reflect the instability of Middle East as it witnesses clashes of war, uprisings, and political instability. The play is, I believe, unique in this century. It goes beyond women's involvement in war; it rather examines the dynamics of war and how established identities can change according to the circumstances of the female victims of war. The rapidly shifting geographies of the Arab world has created this impermanence. The play can also be considered as an open script that describes any war happening in any place at any time, a transnational theatre piece that can be presented and adapted to different settings, contexts and characters. The play presents war as a death machine that has been consuming Arabic women's lives, as it has consumed the lives of women all over the globe.

The play presents three female refugees, from Iraq, Palestine, and Algeria, who meet in one of Germany's detention centers. The characters are as follows: an Iraqi performer, Ameena, who decided to escape Iraq after she was threatened by supporters of the Baathists regimes; the second character is a Palestinian woman, Mariam, who was hit by the stock of an Israeli soldiers' gun; and the third character is an Algerian woman, Reyhana, who led a free life but was afraid of being slaughtered by one of the Islamic extremists in her country. In 2005, Al-Assadi produced the play in Iraq. The identities of the characters there were changed into three Iraqi women with different backgrounds. By 2010 the characters' ethnic identity changed again, so that they became three Iraqi Kurdish women. After about four years of war in Syria, Al-Assadi presented the play in 2015 under a new name, *Women Without God*, and changed the national identity of the three female refugees into three Syrian women. The production has continued in 2017 under the name *Women Without Tomorrow*, directed by Noor Ghanim with different stories of female refugees.

Accordingly, the play is a manifestation which gathers women, war, and theatre. The different backgrounds of the three women indicates the potential role of theatre about war as a postmodern mediator in reflecting the shared consequences of war upon women from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds. Jawad Al-Assadi has retained the main topic of the script, but he has changed the social and political circumstances of his characters following the rapid political changes happening in the Middle East after 2003, depicting women from Arabic countries like Iraq, Palestine, Algeria, Syria, Egypt or Yemen, which have all been devastated by inner or outer conflicts and wars. In fact, Al-Assadi's inspiration has not only come from the successive wars and instability in the Arab homelands; his central concern has also been the dilemma of Arabic. He believes that women are the true reflection of the nation, the traditional icons of hearth and the highly transparent gender who encapsulates mortality and perpetuation.

There is one exception to Al-Assadi's practice of modifying the stories of his characters. He chooses not to change the background of the first character Ameena. She represents the cultivated and intellectual Arabic women who have been deprived of freedom of expression. As Ameena tells her story to the investigator, she refers to a real incident that happened to the Iraqi performer Nahida Al-Rammah, who was arrested and interrogated by Baathist vassals. With this incident in mind, Al-Assadi can be considered as an a conscious, educated and intellectual female artist. She has joined thousands of Iraqi/Arabic intellectuals who have been directly or indirectly forced to leave their homeland. As part of the war's destructive consequences, contemporary Iraqi culture is facing obliteration. Ameena is aware that intellectuals have the power to influence the masses. That is why she believes that art should be dialectical. Freedom of expression should be granted by the Arabic governments to celebrate creativity and pay respect to Iraqi and Arabic innovators. In fact, the struggle for refugee intellectuals is multi-layered. They must work hard to re-establish their scientific, intellectual or artistic status in exile. Most times they are neglected; if their potential is recognized in few cases, if they are lucky. Ameena is entrapped in place and time: she lost her glamour in a time of conflicts and terrorism. Being anonymous in a new foreign land, she feels anxious. She believes that the West has underestimated the civilization of the East.

One of the hard struggles that Ameena goes through is that her western investigator's ignorance of Iraq and Arab's cultural heritage. She is an advocate for her country's deep-rooted civilization, and her realization that those officers are unaware of that exacerbates her desperation. Hence, the agonizing moments for Ameena when she sits in front of the investigator, and she later recalls them:

AMEENA: (*to Reyhana*) Yesterday, I could not control my nerves when the investigator asked blankly: “Do you have theatres? Is there any audience in Iraq? Do you know who Shelley is? Goethe? Shakespeare?” And I answered: “Once your audience knows about Al-Mutanabbi, Al- Maghuott, and Beder Shaker Al-Sayab, only then our audience will know who are Shelley and Goethe are. Idiots!!” They think we are a nation without history, culture nor art, and we should sanctify their culture for being superior and more sophisticated than ours?! While they look at our culture as inferior to theirs (author’s translation).

Judith Butler and others have called out attention to how elements of identity are lost with the loss of companions, community or place. The relations that govern us all towards different people, places or practices formulate parts of our identities. Consequently, if those relations are lost or weakened, so is our ability to comprehend ourselves.

Although the character of Ameena stays unchangeable, Al-Assadi has made significant changes to the two other female characters; Mariam and Reyhana. Mariam in the 2003 script was a Palestinian civilian who experienced the Israeli soldiers’ cruelty as they broke into her house searching for her brother. Israeli soldiers killed her father; one of them struck her breast with the butt of his gun. In the 2005 production of the play in Baghdad, Mariam was a young Iraqi woman who tried to defend her family as the Baathists broke into the house searching for her brother during the 1991 uprising against the Iraqi dictator. They killed her father, and her brother ran away. One of the Baathists kicked her breast. In the 2010 production of the play, Mariam was a young Iraqi woman who tried to defend her family against the US marines who broke in their house searching for her brother, who was in the resistant forces against the US and coalition forces invading Iraq. The previous productions within an Iraqi context adjusted into a Syrian context with the 2015 production, which presented Mariam as a young Syrian woman who was kidnapped and raped several times by different ISIS members under the name of Jihad Al-Nikah. The three different stories ended up by diagnosing Mariam with breast cancer, adding another struggle to her life.

The third character, Reyhana, was presented in the 2003 production as an Algerian woman who resented the Islamic extremist ideologies and practices that affected the daily activities of people, specifically women in that nation. In the 2005 production, Reyhana became an Iraqi psychologist whose husband was killed during ethnic seditions in Iraq after 2003. After this tragedy, she decided to lead a life without commitment. In the 2010 production, Reyhana was presented as an Iraqi woman whose daughter was killed by an American sniper during the US and coalition invasion in 2003. With the escalation of violence in Syria in 2015, Al-Assadi presented Reyhana as a young Syrian woman who decides not to go back to her homeland Lattakia no matter what happens. Not only that, Al-Assadi decided to change her name into Adel, a non-Islamic or Arabic name, apparently referring to the religious skirmishes happening in different Arabic countries like Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and lately Iraq.

If Ameena asks the investigator directly about her identity, Reyhana is a character who denies her identity and her anxiety. Reyhana is a young girl who loves life, dancing and luxury. She came to Germany illegally after a long and exhausting trip, unlike Mariam. Reyhana expresses her admiration of German men. Reyhana is in denial and self-deception. She plays the role of a happy woman in an attempt to convince herself that she is happy in this new land. In the Iraqi version of the play in 2005, Reyhana was a widow whose husband was killed and dismembered in the street because he opposed one of the dictator’s unjust commands. She was shocked as she saw no one dared to help her husband or her from

this predicament. She lost faith in her country, people, religion and love. In one of her monologues she says:

“I will do whatever helps me to forget Iraq, I will throw it away into an old museum and I will wipe away from my passion and mind this great sin named Iraq even if this causes me grief and pain.” (2005:14)

But in the next scene, after performing a lighthearted dance, Reyhana stops, and suddenly she starts to sing the Iraqi anthem “My Country” with tears. She is nostalgic for the Iraq that she used to know, but fears to go back. Until recently, Iraq has been for many a mere physical existence. However, Iraqi migrants, refugees, and expatriates have proved that Iraq is more than a land of territory; it houses their imagination and souls. Long-term suffering from depression, nostalgia or alienation inflicts many of the Iraqis overseas, and reflects their deep attachment to Iraq.

In the 2015 Syrian production of *Women Without God*, Reyhana was a refugee who lost her daughter while they were trying to cross the ocean, one of the appalling tragedies that many refugees have suffered who chose to flee out of their countries by the sea. Reyhana says: “After four years, my daughter went into a boat and never came back, as if the world collapsed on my head” (2005:53). Nevertheless, she pretends to be happy, sings, and dances joyfully. Reyhana asks Ameena many times to perform one of her roles. She wishes that one day she could be a performer just like Ameena. It seems that she is capable of easily adapting several characters and switching from one role to another. However, it is not only Reyhana who shows different identities, Mariam also shows another side of her identity—that of a hostile person. In a confrontation with Reyhana who discloses Miriam's secret of having multiple sexual relations, the latter attacks Reyhana with a knife, and it is Ameena who manages to push them apart.

The three victims are unable to do anything to cope with the oppression they are trying to escape. The tyranny from which they suffer is not only that of Saddam Hussein, or the US invasion, but also the inhumanness of the circumstances that they suffer from in Germany, where they are subjected to severe methods of investigation. They must wait for months and sometimes years, without knowing their destiny after they paid thousands of dollars to reach Germany. Hence, in each production, the death-like journeys of these characters varied between long walks that lasted for weeks or months to reach Germany, or traveling by small boats that might crash under huge waves of the oceans.

Theatre in the twenty-first century provides an excellent instrument for the display of the repetitive war scenarios and the sameness of their inflictions upon Arabic women. As this play is presented with changes in the stories of those women each time it was revived, the theatre becomes a medium of documentation for the varying times and places of wars. Theatre offers its ability as a record to witness of women's experiences in these wars. Hence, although the play keeps its main theme, it changes its context. By doing so, it creates a record of changing events in the Middle East, and an authentication of women's collective predicament. Theatre, in this case, provides a medium for displaying the grim relationship that bonds war and women. The stories offered in the play not only call attention to the misfortune of Iraqis, but also of different Arabic nationalities. Al-Assadi clearly believes that the nationalities of those women are not of importance, but rather the commonality of their suffering.

Theatre has been critical in memorializing the long period of Arabic turbulence. The political instability since the late 1990s, which peaked after 9/11, resulted in several wars in the area and consequently created hundreds of thousands of refugees. Theatre has provided an important insight into women's

involvement in the war. By demonstrating repetitive ramifications of wars inflicted upon Arabic women, theatre can play a fundamental role in creating a new approach of the radical political or social agendas. Nor is the message in any way unique to the Arab world. The theme of war and women's involvement in these wars transcends nationality, place, time and context as long as they share the sameness of the atrocities. Theatre, war, and women continue to affect and define each other. Theatre offers women in the wars a global identity and potentially articulated by a universal performance experience.

Hadeel Abdelhameed is a PhD candidate in La Trobe University; Australia/Victoria. His research focuses mainly on a comparative analysis between theatrical representations of Australian and Iraqi women's involvements during and post war times. This research attempts to bridge a gap in the scholarship of comparative theatrical studies in gender and war. It covers such key areas as a comparison between the concepts of war in Western and Eastern societies and how these differences were reflected on the stages of different cultures.



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