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## The Literary Remediation of Gertrude Bell in Iraqi Novelist Šākir Nūrī's *Ḥātūn Baġdād*

### Abstract

The article examines *Ḥātūn Baġdād* (The Lady of Baghdad), a novel written in Arabic by the Iraqi author Šākir Nūrī and published in 2017. The literary text revolves around the character of Gertrude Bell, an icon of British Orientalism, and draws on her earlier media representations. The present article thus indicates how Nūrī's novel, considered a medium of memory, participates in the remediation of Bell's image in the context of Iraq's modern history. In its three main sections, discussed are the Iraqi writer's views on the relationships between the novel and history, literature and other arts, and the impact of these relations on the narrative structure of *Ḥātūn Baġdād*. The article likewise scrutinizes both the heroine's attitude in the novel towards her colonial mission in Iraq and the country's inhabitants, and Iraqi characters' perceptions of Bell. The article refers to several studies in cultural memory, Orientalism, and postcolonial literature.

**Keywords:** Gertrude Bell, Orientalism, postcolonial literature, Arabic literature, cultural memory



## Introduction: The Inter-medial Dynamics of the Memory of Gertrude Bell

In an interview, Iraqi writer Šākir Nūrī<sup>1</sup> underscored that the publication of his work *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, awarded the Katara Prize for Arabic Novel in 2017,<sup>2</sup> coincided with the centenary of the British occupation of Iraq. This coincidence is of considerable importance since the novel's plot revolves around the figure of Gertrude Bell, an archeologist who entered Baghdad in 1917 with the British military and later served as 'Oriental Secretary' under Percy Cox, High Commissioner of Iraq during the British Mandate.<sup>3</sup> The author likewise explained that his work could not be regarded as a documentary novel about the British woman who died in Baghdad in 1926, even though it was based on historical documents. *Ḥātūn Baġdād* was inspired by this extraordinary personality, who was 'the driving force behind the rise of the kings' of the Hashemite monarchies that emerged in the Middle East after World War I. The literary text 'restores the honor of Gertrude Bell who (...) became part of the history of modern Iraq.'<sup>4</sup>

During a meeting with an audience in Amman, Nūrī said that Gertrude Bell, known to many Iraqis as Miss Bell or Ḥātūn Baġdād (The Lady of Baghdad),<sup>5</sup> was full of contradictions. On the one hand, Bell loved Iraq, as evidenced by her efforts to preserve its cultural heritage and create a modern country. She founded the Baghdad Archeological Museum, which was later transformed into the Iraq Museum, and the Peace Library (*Maktabat as-Salām*), which evolved into the Iraq National Library and Archive. She also co-authored the first Iraqi Constitution. On the other hand, Ḥātūn Baġdād was a committed colonial officer. Nationalist-minded Iraqis have thus perceived her as a figure tied to the foreign occupation of their country. Due to the latter aspect of her activities, Bell has been

<sup>1</sup> Born in Ġalawla in Diyāla Governorate, Šākir Nūrī completed his undergraduate studies in English Literature at the University of Baghdad in 1972. Over the next few years, he worked as a teacher in a secondary school in his hometown. In 1977 he moved to France. He obtained a degree in Information and Communication: Picture and Sound at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris and Photography and Filmmaking at École Nationale Supérieure Louis-Lumière. In 1983, Nūrī obtained a Ph.D. in Communication: Cinematographic and Theatre Studies at the Sorbonne in Paris and was appointed lecturer. Two years later, he joined Radio Monte Carlo and collaborated with a number of Arabic language newspapers. In 2005, he moved to Dubai to work in the media and teach. He has authored several novels, two collections of stories, numerous scientific books and articles, and Arabic translations of works written in English and French. He was awarded the Ibn Battuta Prize for Travel Literature for the travelogue *Bīḥqat iqāma fī burġ Bābil. Yawmiyyāt Bārīs* [A Residence Card in the Tower of Babel. Paris Diaries] in 2013. See Jafar Al Oqaili, 'Shakir Noori: "Literature Creates Legends... and Legends Create Literature"', *Nasher*, 28 February 2018, Viewed 20 July 2021, <<https://nasher-news.com/Shakir-Noori-literature-creates-legends-and-legends-create-literature/>>; Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, Baġdād 2017, pp. 218–219.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Ġā'izat Katārā li-ar-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya', Viewed 15 July 2021, <<https://www.kataranovels.com/prize/winners-2017/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Jafar Al Oqaili, 'Shakir Noori'.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Nūrī clarified the meaning of the word *ḥātūn* in notes that follow the main contents of his novel. According to the author, it signifies 'queen' or 'female ruler' in Turkish. During the Seljuk Empire, the expression referred to 'caliphs' wives and every woman of noble blood.' In Arabic, the word *ḥātūn* means 'a noble lady', and it was used primarily with regard to the wives and daughters of kings and sultans. See Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 212.

chiefly remembered for being a spy (*ġāsūsa*) in Iraq and other Middle Eastern states. As a result, her numerous achievements have generally been forgotten. Regardless of Bell's political role in modern Iraq's early years, Nūrī has stated that she should not have been erased from its history. He explained how he was inspired to write a novel about Bell and the British Mandate by the recent US-led occupation of his homeland.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I seek to present how Šākīr Nūrī reintroduces the memory of Gertrude Bell to Iraqi and other Arabic-speaking readers in *Ḥātūn Baġdād*. I do not, however, outline Bell's life story, including her impressive contributions in various fields – she has been deemed to be 'one of the best-documented women of all time.'<sup>7</sup> Instead, I suggest considering Bell as an icon of the past and a site of memory. Simultaneously, I propose looking at the novel as one of the countless 'media of memory' related to her.<sup>8</sup>

I draw on selected studies on cultural memory by Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney and Laura Basu. They utilize the concepts of 'site of memory' developed by Pierre Nora and 'remediation', a term coined by the authors of *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (1999).<sup>9</sup> Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, cited by both Erll and Basu, provide 'a maximum amount of meaning in a minimum number of signs.'<sup>10</sup> According to Erll, 'Stories, iconic images and topoi about the past flow together and are conflated into a site of memory.' (...) 'Thus, rather than a static, fixed repository or a storehouse of memory, the *lieu de mémoire* should be conceived of, in the words of Ann Rigney, as "a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment".'<sup>11</sup>

Erll and Rigney introduced another term, 'the inter-medial dynamics of memory', the dynamics of which is based on the interaction between 'premediation' and 'remediation'.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Išhār riwāyat "Ḥātūn Baġdād" li-ar-riwā'ī Šākīr Nūrī', 5 May 2019, Viewed 17 July 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzhFB736AEI>>. See also: 'Searching for Gertrude Bell: How the Colonial 'Mother' of Modern Iraq Was Snubbed by History Books and Museums Alike', *Firstpost*, 2 June 2021, Viewed 22 November 2021, <<https://www.firstpost.com/world/searching-for-gertrude-bell-how-the-colonial-mother-of-modern-iraq-was-snubbed-by-history-books-and-museums-alike-9678111.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert. The Remarkable Life of Gertrude Bell*, London 2012, p. xv.

<sup>8</sup> In a section of *Memory in Culture*, Astrid Erll reflects on the concept of 'medium of memory', starting with its simplest definition: 'an entity that, quite literally, 'mediates' between two or more phenomena – in our case, for example, between the individual and collective level of memory.' Next, she emphasizes the complexity of this term and states that 'Media of memory always materialize against the backdrop of existing configurations of memory. Spaces of experience and horizons of expectation, structures of knowledge, memory practices, challenges and contested memories shape the production, transmission and reception of memory media.' Erll sums up by noting that 'Whether and which versions of past events, persons, values or concepts of identity are constructed through a medium of memory depends to no small extent on the conditions prevailing within that memory culture.' See Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, (trans.) Sara B. Young, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 120, 125–126.

<sup>9</sup> See Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Introduction: 'Cultural Memory and Its Dynamics' to *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Berlin 2009, pp. 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Astrid Erll, 'Remembering Across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the Indian "Mutiny"', in: *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Berlin 2009, p. 110; Laura Basu, 'Towards a Memory Dispositif: Truth, Myth, and the Ned Kelly *lieu de mémoire*, 1890–1930', in: *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Berlin 2009, p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> Astrid Erll, 'Remembering Across Time', p. 110.

By ‘premediation’ Erll means ‘the fact that existent media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for future experience and its representation.’ In her view, ‘Premediation therefore refers to cultural practices of looking, naming, and narrating. It is the effect of and the starting point for mediatized memories.’<sup>12</sup> In turn, the German researcher relates ‘remediation’ to ‘the fact that especially those events which are transformed into *lieux de mémoire* are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media.’ For her, ‘the interplay of earlier and later representations’ of sites of memory creates ‘a canon of existent medial constructions.’ At the same time, sites of memory are constantly produced not only in the process of the ‘convergence and condensation of meaning’ but also through their multiple readings by readers from a myriad cultural backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> Erll contends that ‘*Lieux de mémoire* derive their meaning only within the context of (increasingly globalized) media cultures. Medial representations surround, constitute and modify sites of memory. They function according to different media specificities, symbolic systems and within ever changing sociopolitical constellations.’<sup>14</sup>

I do not aim to thoroughly examine the various representations co-creating the site of memory of Gertrude Bell, since this would require an extensive monograph. I indicate, however, some aspects of the inter-medial dynamics of memory related to her. I argue that the premediation phase of these dynamics fell between 1868 and 1926 (Bell’s life, including several months after her death). Bell’s publications may be regarded as ‘the earliest and the most important media which turned her into a site of memory,’<sup>15</sup> as they shaped her first images within British society and generally in the West. Two travelogues describing her journeys to the Middle East before World War I, an English translation of selected poems composed in Persian by the famous medieval mystical poet Hafiz, and four publications on archeology (as well as articles in this field published in scientific journals), led her to achieve fame as a flamboyant explorer of the East. The numerous reports and studies, including many concerning Iraq, which Bell wrote after becoming involved publicly in political activities in 1915, established her reputation as ‘the most powerful woman in the British Empire in the years after World War I.’<sup>16</sup> The Western and Middle Eastern press was another essential medium of memory relating to her in this phase. British, American and Iraqi newspapers proclaimed Bell, both during her lifetime and after her passing, as a ‘Guide, Philosopher and Friend of the Arabs’, ‘Queen of the Desert’, and

<sup>12</sup> Astrid Erll, ‘Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory’, in: *Cultural Memory Studies. An International Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Berlin 2008, p. 392; cf. Astrid Erll, ‘Remembering Across Time’, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> See Astrid Erll, ‘Literature, Film’, p. 392; cf. Astrid Erll, ‘Remembering Across Time’, pp. 110, 131; Laura Basu, ‘Towards a Memory Dispositif’, p. 141; Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Astrid Erll, ‘Remembering Across Time’, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen. The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia*, New York 2005, p. 21.

‘Uncrowned Queen of Iraq’.<sup>17</sup> She was such a ‘celebrated and eminent figure’ in British society that ‘the story of her prewar trip to Hail remained a favored topic for school essays in England until the 1930s.’<sup>18</sup>

In 1927, when Florence Bell, Gertrude’s foster mother, published a collection of selected private letters written by her to members of their family, the first substantial step in the process of remediation was taken.<sup>19</sup> Bell’s other letters and personal writings, including diaries and notebooks, in addition to maps, plans, and approximately 7.000 photographs taken by Gertrude during her travels in the Middle East between 1900 and 1918, were collected in archives in the ensuing decades. Most archival materials concerning Bell, primarily stored in Newcastle University Library, have been digitalized and made available on the Internet in recent decades. In recognition of its importance to the world, the Gertrude Bell Archive was listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2017.<sup>20</sup>

Widening access to Bell’s manuscript and photographic legacy, the publication of subsequent editions of her works and their translation into a multitude of languages, and new extended and uncensored editions of her letter collections have contributed to Bell’s life story being repeatedly told to readers in various popular science publications.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, these publications have triggered seemingly unending interest among scholars from many fields of science, including archeology,<sup>22</sup> translation studies,<sup>23</sup> library science,<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Ibidem, pp. 462–463, 536; Liora Lukitz, *A Quest in the Middle East. Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq*, London 2006, p. 237.

<sup>18</sup> Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia. The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East*, Oxford 2008, pp. 61–62.

<sup>19</sup> See Florence Bell (ed.), *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, Vol. 1, London 1927, pp. 3–5; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 238–239. See also Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, p. 182.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Gertrude Bell Archive’, Viewed 17 July 2021, <<http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/>>; ‘Bell (Gertrude Archive)’, ‘Archives Hub’, Viewed 19 July 2021, <<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/74e845fa-b746-3598-8c8e-cebd02f786b7>>.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Janet Wallach, ‘Daughter of the Desert’, *Smithsonian Magazine* 29/1 (1 April 1998), pp. 122–135; Kerry Ellis, ‘Queen of the Sands’, *History Today* 54/1 (2004), pp. 30–36.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Max Mallowan, ‘Gertrude Bell: The Last Years in Iraq: Archeological Activities’, *Iraq* 38/2 (1978), pp. 81–84, Viewed 16 July 2021, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4200031.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3dc555216b4fa8d1325445342f48c90f>>; Erin Lewis, ‘Gertrude Bell and Archeology in Iraq: from World War I to the ‘War on Terror’’, *The Post Hole* 9 (January 2010), pp. 16–20, Viewed 29 July 2021, <<https://www.theposthole.org/read/article/64>>; Lisa Cooper, ‘Archeology and Acrimony: Gertrude Bell, Ernst Herzfeld and the Study of Pre-Modern Mesopotamia’, *Iraq* 75 (2013), pp. 143–169, Viewed 21 July 2021, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/iraq/article/archaeology-and-acrimony-gertrude-bell-ernst-herzfeld-and-the-study-of-premodern-mesopotamia/125B5AFDA7CA3E5F73BDE28957F025C5>>; Lisa Cooper, *In Search of Kings and Conquerors: Gertrude Bell and the Archeology of the Middle East*, London 2016; Lisa Cooper, ‘“Better than Any Ruined Site in the World”: Gertrude Bell and the Ancient City of Assur’, in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq: A Life and Legacy*, ed. Paul Collins and Charles Tripp, Oxford 2017, pp. 77–95; Mark P.C.A. Jackson, ‘A Critical Examination of Gertrude Bell’s Contribution to Archeological Research in Central Asia Minor’, in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, pp. 47–76; Rosalind Wade Haddon, ‘What Gertrude Bell Did for Islamic Archeology’, in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, pp. 97–123.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Nancy V. Workman, ‘Gertrude Bell and the Poetics of Translation: “The Divan of Hafez”’, *English Literature in Transition* 52/3 (2010), pp. 182–203. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/367732>>.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Ian M. Johnson, ‘Gertrude Bell and the Evolution of the Library Tradition in Iraq’, in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, pp. 257–271.

and women's and gender studies.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, Bell's biographies occupy a special place among the plethora of publications dedicated to diverse facets of her life, activities and writings. Over the last 70 years, the first biography, published in 1940 by Gertrude's cousin, Ronald Bodley, has been followed by several others.<sup>26</sup> If we compare the titles of Bell's biographies published since the 1990s,<sup>27</sup> our attention is drawn to the fact that they frequently replicate the phrase 'queen of the desert', an expression that originated in the premediation phase of her life, in relation to the inter-medial dynamics of memory under discussion.

The process of remediation was transferred from new media to another symbolic system – literature – in 2012 with the publication of *Bell of the Desert*,<sup>28</sup> a novel by the British Australian author Alan Gold.<sup>29</sup> Astrid Erll writes that a 'tight network of other medial representations (and medially represented actions) prepare the ground for the movies, lead reception among certain paths, open up and channel public discussion, and thus endows films with their memorial meaning.'<sup>30</sup> The biographical drama film *Queen of the Desert*, released in 2015 and directed by Werner Herzog,<sup>31</sup> and the documentary *Letters from Baghdad*, released in 2016 and directed by Sabine Krayenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum,<sup>32</sup> are works inspired by earlier media of memory concerning Gertrude Bell that have generated new waves of interest in her.<sup>33</sup> It is thus reasonable to conclude that she has become 'a transnational *lieu de mémoire*'.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See for example Genna Duplisea, 'Writing in the Masculine: Gertrude Lowthian Bell, Gender, and Empire', *Terrae Incognitae* 48/1 (2016), pp. 55–75; May Witwit, 'British Anti-Suffrage and the Emancipation of Women in Iraq: The Case of Gertrude Bell', *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* 4 (October 2016), p. 419, Viewed 23 July 2021, <[https://papers.ssm.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2872955](https://papers.ssm.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2872955)>; Helen Berry, 'Gertrude Bell: Pioneer, Anti-Suffragist, Feminist Icon?', in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, pp. 127–153; Piia Mustamäki, 'Destination Levant: T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell's Narrative Voice as Gender Transgression', *Neohelicon* 46 (2019), pp. 543–555, Viewed 30 July 2021, <<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11059-019-00494-1.pdf>>.

<sup>26</sup> See 'Bell (Gertrude Archive)'.

<sup>27</sup> Among a number of comprehensive biographies on Bell published in the 1990s–2000s and providing an essential point of reference in this article, one can enumerate: Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, and Georgina Howell, *Queen of the Desert*. The last biographer also authored *A Woman in Arabia: The Writings of the Queen of the Desert*, London 2015. In this publication, Howell cites selected letters written by Bell and passages of her other writings in chapters concerning various aspects of her activities as a linguist, poet, alpinist, etc. Examples of shorter popularizing and educational Bell's biographies include: Heather Lehr Wagner, *Gertrude Bell. Explorer of the Middle East*, Philadelphia 2014; and Fergus Mason, *Queen of the Desert. A Biography of the Female Lawrence of Arabia*, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Gold, *Bell of the Desert*, New York 2014.

<sup>29</sup> See Astrid Erll, 'Remembering Across Time', pp. 116–117.

<sup>30</sup> Astrid Erll, 'Literature, Film', p. 396.

<sup>31</sup> Werner Herzog (direc.), *Queen of the Desert*, New York 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Sabine Krayenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum (direc.), *Letters from Baghdad*, New York 2016.

<sup>33</sup> The character of Gertrude Bell appeared earlier in *A Dangerous Man: Lawrence After Arabia*, a British television film directed by Christopher Menaul. In the film, Bell participates in the Paris Peace Conference with the main protagonist, Colonel T. E. Lawrence. See Christopher Menaul (direc.), *A Dangerous Man. Lawrence After Arabia*, 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Astrid Erll, 'Literature, Film', p. 393.

In this article, I allude to some of the above-mentioned components of the inter-medial dynamics associated with Gertrude Bell, perceived as a site of memory, either in its main body or in the footnotes. In the first of the following sections, I touch upon Šākir Nūrī's perception of the relationships between the novel and history and literature and other arts. In this context, the narrative structure of *Ḥātūn Baġdād* is briefly examined. In the second section, I scrutinize how the Iraqi novelist depicts the heroine's attitude towards Iraq and its citizens, following on the discussion of Bell as an Orientalist initiated by Edward Said. The third section, devoted to images of Ḥātūn Baġdād in Iraqi characters' eyes, precedes some concluding remarks. I incorporate in the article numerous quotations from Nūrī's novel in my own translation.

### *Ḥātūn Baġdād* as 'a Novel of Historical Imagination'

On one of the last pages of *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, Šākir Nūrī enumerates several references he read before writing the novel.<sup>35</sup> On the second page, in turn, the Iraqi author cites Claude Lévi-Strauss ('History may lead to anything, provided you get out of it.')<sup>36</sup> and later quotes Oscar Wilde ('The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.').<sup>37</sup> Nūrī likewise relates Milan Kundera's reflections on history, emphasizing that:

History with its movements, wars, revolutions, counterrevolutions, and national disasters does not interest a writer as a topic for description, perpetuation of memory, and explanation since he is not a servant of historians. Whether he is fascinated by history, it is because he sees history as the lamp of an explorer. This lamp moves around human existence, sheds light on it, and on its unexpected and as-yet unrealized possibilities that are invisible and unknown in stagnant periods when history is static.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Among them are the following publications by Gertrude Bell: *Safar Nameh: Persian Pictures* (1894), *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz* (1897), *The Desert and the Sown* (1907), *The Thousand and One Churches* (1909), co-authored with William M. Ramsay, *Amurath to Amurath* (1911), *Palace and Mosque at Ukhaidir: A Study in Early Mohammadan Architecture* (1914), and *The Arabs of Mesopotamia* (1917). Nūrī likewise mentions the first volume of *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, edited by Florence Bell in 1927. The Iraqi novelist also familiarized himself with selected English, French, and Arabic historical studies and other works concerning Gertrude Bell in particular. The latter studies include *Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers, 1914–1926*, the second volume of her letters, edited by Elizabeth Burgoyne in 1961 and translated into Arabic in 2003, and *Gertrude Bell*, a biography by Harry Winston, published in 1978 and translated into Arabic in 2002. See Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 211.

<sup>36</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London 1966, p. 262.

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, (ed.) Richard Ellman, New York 1969, p. 359.

<sup>38</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 3; cf. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, (trans. from the French) Linda Asher, New York 1988, pp. 36–43.

The Iraqi writer recalled the words above during a meeting with an audience in Amman and a press interview, as they are pivotal for his understanding of the relationship between history and literature. In his opinion, literature should aim at meditating on how we deal with history. Nūrī admits that he found it necessary to refer to Bell's publications and studies devoted to her life, activities, and oeuvre. Despite that, he did not define *Khātūn Baġdād* as a historical novel but rather as 'a novel of the historical imagination' (*riwāyat at-tahyīl at-tārīhī*).<sup>39</sup> His literary text does not focus on historical events,<sup>40</sup> but on the psychic interiority of the heroine. Her inner life creates a prism through which he looks at those events.<sup>41</sup> Nūrī is thus not interested in an accurate presentation of historical facts, but rather in showing what is likely to happen in history (*muḥtamal min at-tārīh*).<sup>42</sup> While writing the novel under discussion, he intended to 'combine history, emotions, imagination, and biography.' He sought to 'mix in one melting pot elements of narrative, theatre, cinema, script, and correspondence' in order to 'liberate himself from the limitations of history.'<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to Alan Gold's *Bell of the Desert*, which depicts events in chronological order from a third person perspective intertwined with dialogues between characters, and

<sup>39</sup> By comparison, Kundera distinguishes between 'a novel that examines the historical dimension of human existence' and 'a novel that is an illustration of a historical situation, the description of a society at a given moment, a novelized historiography.' See Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> In a fragment of *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, a literary character says: 'A Novel does not examine the reality but the existence.' In another fragment of Nūrī's work, readers encounter the following words: 'History is the biggest trap for a novel. A Novel is not the servant of history but its scandal.' See Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 128, 132.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, p. 37: 'Of the historical circumstances, I keep only those that create a revelatory existential situation for my characters.'

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ibidem, pp. 42–43. The character of Marie, Ḥātūn's maid, exemplifies how Nūrī creates 'a probable version of history.' Some authors of Bell's biographies identify her with the French Marie Delaire, who worked for Gertrude at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when she lived in England. See Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, p. 108; Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert*, pp. 246, 354. In *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, Marie is portrayed as an Armenian woman who lost her family in the massacres against the Ottoman Empire's Christian population during World War I. Alluding to this first modern genocide, the character of Gertrude Bell says that Armenians 'experienced suffering that no one had experienced before them.' See Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 154–155.

It should also be noted that some Arab critics hinted at factual mistakes in Nūrī's novel. See Nūrān al-'Abīdī, 'Šākir Nūrī kataba riwāyat «Ḥātūn Baġdād» bi-'uyūn aġnabiyya', *Šahīfat al-Muṭaqqaf*, 15 November 2018, Viewed 29 July 2021, <<http://www.almothaqaf.com/b2/932348>>; 'Adnān Ḥusayn Aḥmad, «Ḥātūn Baġdād»... taṭwī' as-sīra ad-dātiyya ilā 'amal riwā'i', *Aš-Šarq al-Awṣat*, 25 December 2017, Viewed 29 July 2021, <<https://aawsat.com/home/article/1122826/«خاتون بغداد» تطويع السيرة الذاتية إلى عمل روائي>>. By way of comparison, one can also find factual inaccuracies in *Bell of the Desert*. For example, Alan Gold does not mention Charles Doughty-Wylie, a significant person in Bell's life (the information about their romantic relationship was likewise censored in the first volume of her letters, see Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 238–239). Instead, the novelist focuses notably on two of Bell's dreams. First, he addresses her youthful dream of creating one Arab nation led by a man who would play a role similar to Saladin's position in the past. Secondly, he highlights her vision of changing women's situation in the Arab world and their emancipation. One can assume that Gold's emphasis on these dreams stems from his being a human rights activist. He dedicated his fictional work to 'all of the astonishing, outstanding, and brilliant women of the past who have been dismissed, discounted, and obliterated from the annals of history, simply because men were in charge of keeping the records.' See Alan Gold, *Bell of the Desert*, pp. 5, 53–54, 61, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Ġa'far al-'Uqaylī, 'Šākir Nūrī: riwāyātī murtaḃa bi-al-wāqī' wa-lakinnahā laysat asīra lahu', *Nizwā*, 14 August 2019, Viewed 21 July 2021, <<https://www.nizwa.com/شاکر نوري رواياتي مرتبطة بالواقع ولكن/لكن>>. See also 'Išhār riwāyat «Ḥātūn Baġdād»'.



thereby resembles a more traditional form of historical novel, Nūrī's fictional work can be characterized as a hybrid text. The Iraqi author employed variegated postmodern experimental techniques typical of postcolonial novels.<sup>44</sup> *Ḥātūn Baġdād* consists of ten chapters, seven of which pertain essentially to the formative years of modern Iraq. This phase is portrayed by shedding light on selected scenes from Gertrude Bell's life. The narrative, however, does not follow the chronology of her biography. The first chapter shows Gertrude performing her duties in Baghdad after the British troops entered the city in 1917, while the third chapter recalls Bell's youth in England and her journey to Persia in 1892, during which she established her first romantic relationship with Henry Cadogan.<sup>45</sup> The same chapter focuses on Gertrude's second love affair, that with Dick Doughty-Wylie several years later. The subsequent two chapters describe Bell's involvement in administering Iraq in 1920–1921, when her primary objective, the Hashemite Prince Fayṣal's coronation, was successfully achieved. Both chapters seven and eight (though in reverse chronological order), concentrate on the last two years of Gertrude's long stay in Baghdad (1925–1926), when she did not actively participate in exercising colonial power. Chapter ten stages the last night of Bell's life from her maid Marie's point of view and Ḥātūn's official funeral ceremony.<sup>46</sup>

In these seven chapters, narrative perspectives shift frequently. The prevailing first-person voice of Gertrude Bell is usually delivered in the form of internal monologue. However, the heroine's manner of expressing herself varies considerably from one fragment of the text to another, with her speaking more exaltedly and romantically while recounting her travel to Persia and her love story with Cadogan. The protagonist often addresses her father and foster mother in letters, and they likewise share their thoughts and feelings in their correspondence to Gertrude.<sup>47</sup> The heroine's homodiegetic and

<sup>44</sup> See Monika Fludernik, 'The Narrative Forms of Postcolonial Fiction', in: *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Fiction*, ed. Ato Quayson, Cambridge 2011, p. 913.

<sup>45</sup> Nūrī's description of Bell's journey to Persia and her love story with Henry Cadogan resembles relevant descriptions in her biographies and scenes in Herzog's film. For example, all these media of memory depict Gertrude's horseback riding in Henry's company in the surroundings of Teheran. They reach the Tower of Silence, a place where Zoroastrians leave their fellow believers' dead bodies to decay or become food for birds of prey. See Šakir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 64–66; cf. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, pp. 65–66; Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert*, p. 55. Bell described this scene in her first travelogue. See Gertrude Bell, *Persian Pictures. From the Mountains to the Sea*, London 2014, pp. 16–18.

<sup>46</sup> By comparison, in Alan Gold's *Bell of the Desert*, most chapters are devoted to Gertrude Bell, but some center on other characters. For example, they include conversations between King Fayṣal and Lawrence of Arabia and a scene from the British Parliament. In his novel, the British Australian author emphasizes the friendly relationships between Bell, Lawrence of Arabia, and King Fayṣal.

<sup>47</sup> In the biographies on Bell authored by Wallach, Howell, and Lukitz, fragments of her letters and other writings are embedded in a chronological third-person narrative, including an outline of the socio-historical background. All of these publications not only refer to the first-person perspective of Gertrude Bell to reflect her thoughts and emotions, but also employ other media of memory, mainly her photos. In turn, in the documentary *Letters from Baghdad*, passages of Bell's letters are read by female lectors in accordance with the different stages of her life, mainly by Tilda Swinton, whose voice represents the voice of the adult narrator. While listening to Bell's words, viewers look at her private and official photos, including those taken during her travels in the Middle East, fragments of her reports (sometimes read), documents produced by others, and pictures of articles dedicated to her, etc. This dense audio-visual

intradiegetic narrative frames her dialogues with other characters. This is also the case of the third-person omniscient narrator who reads Bell's mind in some fragments of these chapters and her maid Marie's in the tenth chapter. In addition, this heterodiegetic and extradiegetic narration conveys the thoughts of the Iraqis observing Bell and their discussions about her.

The other three chapters relate to the recent history of Iraq. Chapter two is set in Baghdad during the American occupation of the country in 2003.<sup>48</sup> Chapter six reports events in the capital in July 2015, whereas chapter nine – in June 2016. Although these chapters allude to the reality of the land being in turmoil, they concentrate primarily on conversations between six men who usually meet in the 'Mesopotamia' (*Ar-Rāfidayn*) pub, located at Aviation Square (*Sāḥat at-Ṭayarān*) in the centre of Baghdad. These five Iraqis share a fascination for Gertrude Bell. They include the philosopher Abū Socrates; Yūnis, an unemployed screenwriter and author of a screenplay inspired by Ḥātūn; Nu'mān, a director who returned from exile in Paris and is now dreaming about making a movie about her; Hāšim, a former cameraman in a closed cinema; and Maṣṣūr, who works guarding Bell's grave. They are joined by Fernando, a Venezuelan expert in libraries, who came to Baghdad to prepare a report concerning the burning of the National Library of Iraq in 2003.<sup>49</sup>

It should be mentioned that the ninth chapter comprises a subchapter that may be seen as an epilogue to Bell's literary biography. First, this subchapter narrates an investigation conducted for *The Times* by a reporter who arrived in Baghdad in 1926 to inquire about the circumstances of Ḥātūn's passing and record Iraqis' reactions to this event. Secondly, it also contains the words of famous British political personalities about Gertrude Bell, including those uttered by Lawrence of Arabia.<sup>50</sup> Thirdly, the subchapter is closed with a screenplay written by Yūnis, which tells one more version of Bell's life in Baghdad.<sup>51</sup>

In these three chapters, other intermedial references to the performing arts also occur. In the second chapter, the philosopher Abū Socrates says to Fernando, whom he encounters

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narrative is supplemented by scenes from archival films depicting different places in the world Bell visited and events in which she took part.

<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in Gold's novel, the initial fragment of the first chapter mentions the American-led invasion of Iraq in April 2003. It constitutes an introduction to a chronological narrative about Bell's life. See Alan Gold, *Bell of the Desert*, pp. 6–9.

<sup>49</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 26–33.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 185–186. Accordingly, some authors of Bell's biographies recall the public's reactions to her death. Cf. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, pp. 525–527; Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert*, pp. 463–469; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 236–239. The documentary *Letters from Baghdad*, for its part, incorporates scenes with actors playing the roles of personalities who knew Bell, including her colleagues in the British administration of Iraq and Lawrence of Arabia. They share their thoughts about her.

<sup>51</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 187–193. An exemplary fragment of Yūnis' screenplay:

'Exterior. In the afternoon.

The Tigris River. Panoramic shot.

Ḥātūn rests on her wooden chair. She drinks a glass of tea prepared by her maid Marie. She is staring at the flow of the Tigris River. In her soul, there is an overwhelming clamor that mingles with Mozart's music. A close-up shows her facial expression and reactions to the music that has led her deep into thought.'

on the street, that he needs him to be the sixth person investigating Gertrude Bell's life, along with his Iraqi friends. In this way, they are just like the six characters searching for an author in Luigi Pirandello's play.<sup>52</sup> The sixth chapter, entitled *Six characters in search of a woman*, encompasses the monologues of men sitting at a table in the 'Mesopotamia' pub.<sup>53</sup> These five Iraqis frequently use plural verbs while pondering the shared experiences of their compatriots after 2003. Their monologues tend to blend together, as most of the chapter is not divided into paragraphs.<sup>54</sup> Readers may have an impression that they are watching a film scene in which the camera focuses on the men's faces successively.

During their meeting in the pub and the screening of *Queen of the Desert*, directed by Werner Herzog, in a cinema, the men discuss the idea of making a film dedicated to Gertrude Bell. It would be their Iraqi response to the Hollywood version of her biography they find disappointing because the German director left out the last ten years of Ḥātūn's life.<sup>55</sup> In their opinion, a film telling her story should be shot in Baghdad, the city she loved, since others do not understand her as well as Iraqis do.<sup>56</sup> One of these characters says: 'What a paradox! The Americans always make us compete with them. Is this our destination? *Queen of the Desert* versus *Ḥātūn Baġdād*. Occupation versus dictatorship. Secularism versus religiousness.'<sup>57</sup>

Nūrī's conviction that all arts are interconnected, expressed in his literary texts by incorporating specific techniques and intertextual allusions borrowed from them,<sup>58</sup> finds an additional reflection in the work under discussion. On the novel's front cover, there is a picture of an oil painting on canvas. It was made by Maḥmūd Fahmī, an Iraqi painter living in Canada, at Nūrī's request to mark the one-hundred anniversary of Baghdad's British occupation. The painting depicts Gertrude Bell sitting on a bench on the bank of the Tigris River. She is drinking tea and resting just after having arrived from Basra in April 1917. Having studied information from that period, Fahmī produced a detailed representation of Bell's clothing and personal items. An issue of *The Illustrated London News* dated 1 March 1917 is lying on a table in front of Bell. Its cover page features a portrait of General Frederick Stanley Maud, Commander-in-chief of the British army in

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> In contrast, the other two chapters (the second and ninth) are told from the third-person perspective and entail dialogues of literary characters.

<sup>54</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 117–133; cf. Luigi Pirandello, 'Six Characters in Search of an Author', in: *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks: New Translations of Six Major Plays*, ed. Umberto Mariani and Alice Gladstone Mariani, Toronto 2011, pp. 119–167.

<sup>55</sup> In Werner Herzog's *Queen of the Desert*, there are not many general historical references except information in the opening and ending credits and a few symbolic scenes, including one based on a famous photo of Bell, Churchill, and Lawrence of Arabia with the pyramids and sphinx in Cairo in the background. Most of the scenes illustrating Bell's life, from her youth to 1915, concentrate on her two romantic relationships and journeys to the Middle East, especially her encounters with Bedouin tribes and her spiritual bond with the desert. The latter theme can be seen as being distinctive of Herzog's filmography.

<sup>56</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 123–124, 182, 194–196.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 126.

<sup>58</sup> See Jafar Al Oqaili, 'Shakir Noori'.

Mesopotamia and ‘the conqueror of Baghdad’.<sup>59</sup> In the background of Fahmī’s painting, there are several British soldiers, as well as warships on the river, and airplanes in the sky. The painter likewise shows a number of Iraqis standing before the Al-Wazir Mosque (*Ġāmi‘ al-Wazīr*) and distant historical landmarks situated on the Tigris River.<sup>60</sup> By comparison, on the front covers of Bell’s works, her anglophone biographies published in recent decades, and other publications concerned with her, readers can see Gertrude’s portrait photos, including those taken by her, and other photos showing Bell during her travels and archeological excavations against the backdrop of Middle Eastern landscapes, featuring desert, Bedouins, and camels.<sup>61</sup>

### The Character of Gertrude Bell as an Orientalist

‘And neither was it by accident that men and women like Gertrude Bell, T.E. Lawrence, and St. John Philby, Oriental experts all, posted to the Orient as agents of empire, friends of the Orient, formulators of policy alternatives because of their intimate and expert knowledge of the Orient and of Orientals,’ as Edward Said writes in *Orientalism*.<sup>62</sup> When characterizing these and other personalities, who played a substantial role as colonial experts during World War I, and some of them as high-rankly officers in the British administration of the Middle Eastern mandate territories after the conflict,<sup>63</sup> Said points out that ‘they were bound together by contradictory notions and personal similarities: great individuality, sympathy and intuitive identification with the Orient, a jealously preserved sense of personal mission in the Orient, cultivated eccentricity, a final disapproval of the Orient.’<sup>64</sup> Said, therefore, emphasizes an inherent paradox of their mindset. On the one hand, these Orientalists were convinced of their profound understanding and empathy towards the Other, stemming from their ‘intensely personal encounter with the Orient, Islam, or the Arabs.’<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, they failed to eliminate both the Western bias towards ‘the Orientals’, shaped over the centuries or their aspiration to ‘preserve the Orient and Islam under the control of the White Man.’<sup>66</sup> According to Said, Bell and other colonial experts perceived the Middle Easterners as study subjects, and described them by using conventional phrases and generalizations

<sup>59</sup> British administrators had used the term ‘Mesopotamia’ regarding Iraqi areas liberated from the Ottoman rule before the official state’s name was introduced in 1921. See Muhsin Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq. Culture and Power in Iraq*, London 2006, pp. 78–79.

<sup>60</sup> See Šakir Nūrī, *Ĥātūn Bagdād*, p. 210.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Heather Lehr Wagner, *Gertrude Bell*; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*; Fergus Mason, *Queen of the Desert*; Gertrude Bell, *Persian Pictures*; Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert*; Lisa Cooper, *In Search of Kings and Conquerors*.

<sup>62</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London 2003, p. 224.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 246.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 224.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 237.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238.

concerning their nature. They thereby perpetuated a static image of the Orient derived from their Eurocentric point of view.<sup>67</sup>

Having depicted Bell in such an unflattering way, the author of *Orientalism* sparked a scientific debate on her colonial activities and attitude towards the people of the Middle East. Over subsequent decades, multiple voices joined this debate.<sup>68</sup> Some researchers investigating Iraq's modern history and culture, including a number of Iraqi intellectuals,<sup>69</sup> regarded Bell as a typical British imperialist, as Said did. In their opinion, she was utterly sure that her civilizing mission in Mesopotamia was legitimate. In theory, it was supposed to improve Iraqis' living conditions by creating a new state after centuries of Ottoman negligence and corruption. In practice, this mission presupposed the British right to speak and govern on Iraqis' behalf since they were considered unable to self-determine. Moreover, it allowed the British administration to take repressive actions against them in the event of their seeking independence or acts of defiance.<sup>70</sup>

Janet Wallach writes in *Desert Queen. The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell* that 'Bell was given the title of Oriental Secretary, a British euphemism for Chief Intelligence Agent.' She adds that 'Bell's network of informants, which stretched from Damascus to

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, pp. 228–249.

<sup>68</sup> For instance, Lynn Masie Sawyer and Piia Mustamäki sought to answer whether Edward Said was right about Bell's inability to look beyond the Western canon of imaginations about the Middle East while analyzing *The Desert and the Sown* in their articles. The scholars admitted that Said was not wrong in many respects. They indicated some fragments of the travelogue testifying to Bell's condescending attitude towards Middle Easterners. She viewed them as adult children who could not organize themselves into large communities due to their continuous tribal feuds. Simultaneously, Bell steadfastly believed in European rationality and progress and was convinced of Eastern culture's decadence. However, the authors recognized that Bell's observations concerning the Middle East societies were multidimensional and sometimes even questioned Orientalist discourse. Bell often wrote about Orientals respectfully and with sympathy and was particularly impressed by their tolerance and hospitality. She noticed similarities between them and Westerners, and thus rejected the 'we/they' dichotomy. See Lynn Masie Sawyer, 'Orientalism and the Three British Dames: De-essentialization of the Other in the Work of Gertrude Bell, Freya Stark, and E. S. Drower' (MA diss., Liberty University, Lynchburg 2012), pp. 42, 47–48; Piia Mustamäki, 'Destination Levant', pp. 545–546, 554.

<sup>69</sup> See introductions by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-'Alwaḡī and 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf to books containing Bell's letters translated into Arabic. They both saw Bell primarily as a colonial occupier but pointed out contradictions in her stance towards Iraq and Iraqis: 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-'Alwaḡī, 'Al-Mis Bīl. Ḥayātuhā wa-mawliduhā', in: *Al-'Irāq fī rasā'il al-Mis Bīl 1917–1926*, (trans.) Ġa'far al-Ḥayyāt, Bayrūt 2003, pp. 13–28; 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, 'Al-Mar'a al-laṭī anša't dawla wa-naṣṣabat malikan', in: *Ġūrtrūūd Bīl. Min Awraqihā aš-ṣaḥṣīyya 1914–1926*, Elisabeth Burgoyne (ed.), Muzaffar Numīr 'Abbās (trans. from the English and ed.), Bayrūt 2002, pp. 9–22.

<sup>70</sup> See Muhsin Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, pp. 59, 68–69, 77–83; Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq. The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*, New York 2003, pp. 31, 77–81, 86–93. Genna Duplisea came to similar conclusions when scrutinizing various texts written by Bell, including two reports about Iraq, *The Arabs of Mesopotamia* and *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*. In her view, the former report, used as a manual for British soldiers in Iraq, can be considered an expression of imperial expansionism. By employing the first-person plural, Bell spoke on behalf of the British imperium about Arab tribes incapable of exercising power independently. In the latter report, Bell wrote that the defeated Turks had governed Mesopotamia destructively and that Iraqis could not protect monuments of their glorious past. For her, the organization of the area under British tutelage was the best remedy. In Duplisea's opinion, Bell followed conquest rhetoric both in her imperialistic writings and personal ones. In the latter, she sometimes confessed that she experienced inner dilemmas regarding the legitimacy of British control over Iraq. See Genna Duplisea, 'Writing in the Masculine', pp. 16–17, 21–25.

northern Arabia, kept her up-to-date.’ Her circle of friends and acquaintances included a Shiite leader, a chief of the Anazeh tribe, and a Sunni notable, the Naqib of Baghdad (*naqīb al-ašrāf*).<sup>71</sup> While recognizing these facts, Wallach and other biographers create a more complex psychological portrait of Gertrude Bell than scholars evaluating merely the effects of her political activities. This is because they incorporate fragments of her private letters and analyze them in their narratives.<sup>72</sup> These biographers perceive Bell as a person driven by ambivalent thoughts and emotions in various life stages in the face of changing socio-political circumstances.<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, they view her as an imperialist and Orientalist who believed she was ‘a shaper of history’ and ‘a carrier of civilization’.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, they see her as a woman who doubted the legitimacy of that mission,<sup>75</sup> and who ‘became the victim of a misconceived enterprise launched by an empire riddled with contradictions and prejudices.’ In exploring the last years of Bell’s life in Baghdad, they focus on ‘the price paid [by her] for the illusions of racial supremacy and political dominance.’<sup>76</sup>

Such a multidimensional psychological portrait of Gertrude Bell emerges likewise in *Hātūn Baġdād*. Nūrī’s heroine represents an ambivalent attitude towards ‘the Orientals’, like that indicated by Said, resulting from tensions between her intuitive and romantic identification with the East and her imperialistic striving for dominance over it. In the chapter dealing with Bell’s administrative activities in the first months following her arrival in Baghdad in 1917, the omniscient narrator depicts her this way:

She wrote her biography mingled with the history of Mesopotamia. She trod its soil, and stories emanated from its core. As long as she talked with this sacred ground tenderly, through monuments, relics, and precious artifacts telling human history from the dawn of time to the present, she did not feel weary and bored in her second homeland. Horse riding amidst almond trees and fields of deities, among people ambiguous like their deities, strong like their kings, and immortal like their legends – all this was an eternal bliss for her. And here she is in the warehouse of history, filled with secrets and mysteries. [...] She looks at the moon in the sky over Baghdad while standing on the balcony of her house. She attaches her soul to the mysteries of Mesopotamia and tries to decipher them during sleepless nights. And once she moves towards politics, she goes

<sup>71</sup> Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, p. 533. For more on Bell’s membership in a community of British civil agents before and after the Great War, see Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, pp. 24–57 and others.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. ‘Abd ar-Rahmān Munif, ‘Al-Mar’a al-latif anša’t dawla’, pp. 20–21.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Tamara Chalabi, ‘Fragments of a Mirror: The Writing of Gertrude Bell’, in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, p. 182.

<sup>74</sup> Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, p. 8; cf. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, pp. 280, 310–311.

<sup>75</sup> Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, p. 274.

<sup>76</sup> Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, p. 6; see also pp. 5, 19, 243–244.

out on a boat bouncing around on a raging river. The waves of a dream embrace her, a dream to build a royal palace.<sup>77</sup>

Another chapter of Nūrī's novel, relating the events of August 1921, after Bell's dream of installing a constitutional monarchy in Mesopotamia came true, contains her further considerations on this matter in the form of an internal monologue. The heroine calls the elected King Fayṣal 'her wonderful creature' and contends that his destiny is entangled with her own 'by the power of magic and respect.' She states that humankind was born in Mesopotamia, a land from which prophets were sent, and Noah's Ark set sail.<sup>78</sup> In a fragment of *Ḥātūn Baġdād* in the form of a letter Gertrude wrote to Florence in 1925, the literary character confesses once again that she feels attached to the long nights in Baghdad and the breeze coming over the Tigris River. She does not wish to leave 'the city with an eternal soul that rises like a phoenix from its ashes' each time invaders destroy it. She does not want to abandon 'the city of peace that has the rights of tolerance inscribed upon its gates and walls.' The protagonist worries that all its relics and treasures will be lost one day – when people will arrive in Iraq with a desire to steal 'the mysteries of history', just like German and French archeologists once did.<sup>79</sup> She is concerned about Baghdad's future and imagines that it will become 'a city of ghosts, tormented by sectarian groups fighting each other.' It will turn into an entrenched city whose residents will be forced to defend themselves against a Barbarian invasion.<sup>80</sup>

In the above-mentioned and other fragments of Nūrī's work, Bell appears to be driven by a passion for discovering remnants of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia. She endeavors to protect these treasures against the archeological missions of other colonial states that would like to grab them and smuggle them out.<sup>81</sup> The heroine seems to be obsessed with the land's ancient history. She dreams of restoring Iraq's past glory and perceives its contemporary inhabitants first and foremost as descendants of the old Mesopotamian cultures.<sup>82</sup> The literary character emerges as a politician who believes in her power to create kings. At the same time, she is aware of the impermanence of political entities, owing to her knowledge of the historical fates of different countries and nations.

<sup>77</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p. 107. On Bell's personal relationship with King Fayṣal and her vision of him as a ruler of the new created Iraqi state see Tamara Chalabi, 'Fragments of a Mirror', pp. 177–179; Myriam Yakoubi, 'Gertrude Bell's Perception of Faisal I of Iraq and the Anglo-Arab Romance', in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, pp. 197–212.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Gertrude Bell, 'Letters, 26 May 1926, Gertrude Bell to her father, Sir Hugh Bell', 'Gertrude Bell Archive', Viewed 21 August 2021, <[http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=908](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=908)>; Gertrude Bell, 'Letters, 23 June 1926, Gertrude Bell to her father, Sir Hugh Bell', 'Gertrude Bell Archive', Viewed 21 August 2021, <[http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=917](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=917)>.

<sup>80</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 142. On Bell's legislation aimed at preventing illicit diggings and illegal export of antiquities from Iraq see Magnus T. Bernhardsson, 'Gertrude Bell and the Antiquities Law of Iraq', in: *Gertrude Bell and Iraq...*, pp. 241–255.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Genna Duplisea, 'Writing in the Masculine', pp. 19–20; Erin Lewis, 'Gertrude Bell and Archeology in Iraq', pp. 17–18.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, p. 282; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 7, 224.

For this reason, she is worried about the future of her great project.<sup>83</sup> And lastly, the protagonist is portrayed as an Englishwoman fascinated by the mysterious Orient and its romantic landscapes. She ‘dreamed about the East in her Victorian house in London.’ She ‘dreamed about flying with Sindbad on his carpet during the cold nights of London since she was a child.’<sup>84</sup>

Like Bell’s biographies discussed earlier in this article, *Ḥātūn Baġdād* illustrates the entanglement of the heroine’s secret dreams and fascinations with her political aspirations. As a British agent, the protagonist feels confident about her extraordinary familiarity with the Middle Easterners’ mentality and her remarkable ability to connect with them and manage them. Simultaneously, she truly believes that by pursuing imperialistic politics she will create in Baghdad a new centre of Arabic civilization and enable Arabs to take responsibility for their fate after centuries of Ottoman servitude.<sup>85</sup> In a subchapter depicting Bell’s work alongside the High Commissioner of Iraq Sir Percy Cox, which involved organizing meetings between him and the sheikhs of Iraqi tribes, the protagonist meditates in an internal monologue that one needs to explore many sciences to fathom what is going on ‘in the souls of these Bedouins.’ She remarks that ‘an Englishman usually does not make a greater effort to understand the Other. It is probably because of the colonial approach that makes him look down on the others.’ Subsequently, the literary character declares that she disagrees with this attitude. Moreover, she tries to grasp the gestures, facial expressions, and reactions of the tribal sheikhs.<sup>86</sup> On her political role, the heroine comments as follows:

I had to visit the tribal sheikhs because they run the country from the inside, behind the scenes, by pulling strings. Many of us do not comprehend that. They do not understand that this society is tribal from the inside and civilized from the outside. We are on the top of the volcano, and we don’t know when it will erupt. The imperium needed them badly, and I was the only one who communicated with them. This is my fate, and perhaps it is the fate of the imperium looking for a place on which it could set foot in Mesopotamia.<sup>87</sup>

In another subchapter of Nūrī’s novel, touching upon Bell’s official duties in the British administration’s headquarters in 1920, Ḥātūn delves into her thoughts once again. She emphasizes that ‘Everybody were afraid of my getting closer to Iraqis’ hearts. Yet, I am

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Lisa Cooper, *In Search of Kings and Conquerors*, pp. 229–234.

<sup>84</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 50, 94; cf. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, pp. 239, 298; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 5, 58, 235.

<sup>85</sup> See Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, pp. 274, 280, 310–311, 346–347, 353, 360, 413–416, 488; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 6, 10–19, 125–126.

<sup>86</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 11, also 83.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12; cf. Gertrude Bell, ‘Letters, 18 December 1920, Gertrude Bell to her father, Sir Hugh Bell’, ‘Gertrude Bell Archive’, Viewed 21 August 2021, <[http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=444](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=444)>.



proud of my being among them and smelling the pleasant fragrance of their ground.' Moreover, she maintains that Arabs 'deserve a better life, which is why history will smile upon them one day [...] because they refused to be humiliated by the Turks. [...] They are capable of restoring their civilization if they want and if they open their eyes.'<sup>88</sup> The protagonist likewise talks to herself while participating in Faysal's coronation ceremonies. After the results of a referendum organized by the British are officially read, and Bell hears that 96% of Iraqi citizens voted for the Hashemite prince to be their king, she feels that she is witnessing a unique historical moment. It is the first time this nation can make its own choices after five centuries, she states.<sup>89</sup>

Nonetheless, in *Ḥātūn Baġdād* the heroine often doubts both the rightness of the British measurements against the Middle Easterners and her own causative power.<sup>90</sup> The subchapter entitled *The Empire on Which the Sun Never Sets* begins with a reflection that haunts her repeatedly after the Iraqi monarchy is established:

I am deeply distressed by the thought that we have put on the mask of the Ottomans we fought. We have started to rule by utilizing their old methods, oscillating in our souls between victory and defeat, chaos and order. We are incapable of answering the question: Who destroyed the Ottoman Empire's foundations, we or they, due to their inward collapse?<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, bitterness and skepticism about the imperial involvement in Iraq accompany Ḥātūn in her last years in Baghdad. At one point in the novel, she articulates: 'We were a part of that enormous ambition competing with the huge war machine in Mesopotamia.'<sup>92</sup> At another, the protagonist asks herself: 'Has Baghdad's sun started to shine upon the defeat of our Empire? The Empire completed its tasks. Its wars stopped making sense.'<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, she questions her identification with the British colonial mission: 'My whole being that has melted with the Empire is calling me now and wants me to separate from it.'<sup>94</sup>

The heroine's attitude towards Iraqis is also ambivalent. In line with Homi Bhabha, we can say that she often looks at them with the colonizer's eye, driven by 'the ambition to civilize and modernize them.' She is convinced that she knows better than they what is best for them. She is thus obsessed with 'the desire of colonial mimicry', 'the desire for

<sup>88</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 81; cf. Gertrude Bell, 'Letters, 28 August 1921, Gertrude Bell to her father, Sir Hugh Bell', 'Gertrude Bell Archive', Viewed 20 August 2021, <[http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=501](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=501)>.

<sup>89</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 104; cf. Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, p. 80; 'Abd ar-Rahmān Munīf, 'Al-Mar'a al-lafī anša't dawla', pp. 16–18.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Lisa Cooper, *In Search of Kings and Conquerors*, pp. 238–239; Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, pp. 243–244.

<sup>91</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 107.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem, p. 148.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p. 160; cf. Lisa Cooper, *In Search of Kings and Conquerors*, pp. 238–239.

<sup>94</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 166.

a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*,<sup>95</sup> as Bhabha quotes Jacques Lacan. Moreover, she views Iraq's inhabitants with a Eurocentric explorer's eye, as if they were objects of a scientific study.

After Fayṣal's coronation ceremony, the literary character returns home and writes a letter to Florence, sharing her thoughts and emotions about Iraq's future. On the one hand, Ḥātūn is content with her successful mission and hopes that the new king will support the Empire in ruling the state. On the other hand, Bell expresses her concern over the threat posed by Iraqi opposition activists. In her view, they may 'transform into soldiers who would overthrow the royal throne on our heads,' which could lead to violence and bloodshed. The heroine likewise writes: 'The people here do not know their interests and do not comprehend that the monarchy is the only guarantee to stabilize their country in the wake of misadventures of mad military men.' Finally, she concludes: 'It would be difficult to restore this mosaic fabric if it would be torn. The Iraqi society is like an ant mound. If a treacherous foot would hit it and scatter it, it could not be brought together again.'<sup>96</sup>

Another passage in *Ḥātūn Baġdād* describes Bell accompanying the king in the celebration of Ashura and observing Shia mourners whipping themselves during the commemoration rituals. The following night, the protagonist ponders the Shiites' way of life and thinking. She cannot fathom why they prefer to submit to religious leaders' will instead of being, first of all, Iraqi citizens. She wonders why Shia Muslims are so committed to these bloody rituals since they make them 'poorer, more isolated, and marginalized, puppets in the hands of the black turban owners.'<sup>97</sup>

By contrast, Bell in Nūrī's novel also reflects on the disrespect Westerners show towards the Bedouins, whom she admires. In correspondence with her father, she claims that 'they are more skilled and intelligent than we are, and more harmonized with nature.'<sup>98</sup> In an internal monologue, the heroine recalls that some Bedouins told her they felt ignored by first the Turkish, and then the English and Iraqi authorities. She was the only one who cared about them and looked after their interests. A Bedouin said to Gertrude that they were proud of her and called her 'a mirror of their life.'<sup>99</sup>

What is more, the literary character attempts to perceive the Other objectively. And thus, she notes: 'Iraqis are neither angels nor satans but people tempered by history.'<sup>100</sup> However, she admits to herself that she sometimes fails to understand them: 'We don't know what is going on inside them. They are mystical like their Sufis, ambiguous like their goods, [...]. An Iraqi [...] wears one face publicly and the other secretly. [...] A Bedouin

<sup>95</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, pp. 43, 86, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 105.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114; cf. Gertrude Bell, 'Letters, 17 September 1921, Gertrude Bell to her stepmother and father, Dame Florence Bell and Sir Hugh Bell', 'Gertrude Bell Archive', Viewed 23 August 2021, <[http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=506](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=506)>; Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, p. 88.

<sup>98</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 83.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 215–216; cf. Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, pp. 77, 91–93.

<sup>100</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 84.

hides his revenge in a dagger, and an intellectualist folds his thoughts in a bag.’<sup>101</sup> Bell ultimately feels more disappointed with Iraqis towards the end of her life. In a conversation with King Fayṣal, she emphasizes the contradictions inherent in their nature, characterizing them as ‘stubborn and demanding, rebellious but quickly subordinating.’<sup>102</sup>

To conclude, in her ambivalence about the Iraqi land and its people, Nūrī’s heroine resembles Gertrude Bell as depicted in her biographies to a great extent. Janet Wallach, who drew one of her biographical images, notes that she treated the newly created state and its residents like children needing care.<sup>103</sup> According to Wallach, Bell assumed that Iraq would return the favour by delivering agricultural products and oil supplies and giving access to archeological discoveries.<sup>104</sup> She wanted to see herself as a mother to the Iraqis while acting as a colonial oppressor. Was she then two-faced?<sup>105</sup>

First, it is worth looking at Bell’s controversial position – both that of the ‘real Bell’ described by her biographers and the ‘literary Bell’ portrayed in *Ḥātūn Baḡdād* – towards ‘the Orientals’ in light of the concept of ‘intimacy’ proposed by Stephen Jankiewicz, an American researcher who analyzed Gertrude’s friendship with King Fayṣal based on her letters. On the one hand, as a representative of a colonial power, Bell deliberately manipulated the king, who was dependent on the Empire. On the other hand, she empathized with him, for she felt emotionally attached to him and to the imperial project of establishing the Iraqi monarchy, ‘a grandiose attempt at creating a connection between cultures, between nations, and between her own self and a greater cause.’ Jankiewicz maintains that she, therefore, had to create a hybrid self.<sup>106</sup> In his opinion, ‘Intimate spaces (whether conceptual, social, or physical) were where a dialogue between cultures could occur most productively and where Orientalist attempted to reconcile a desire for connection with the demands of supposedly objective scholarship or political domination.’<sup>107</sup>

Secondly, it is worthwhile to view Bell’s nostalgic, romantic vision of Mesopotamia and its inhabitants in a broader context – in the light of Priya Satia’s incisive analysis of the cultural world of the British intelligence community in the Middle East in the pre- and post-World War I era. The US-based historian argues that exploration of this region by colonial agents ‘was not merely travel in the physical space of Arabia but in the imaginative space of books.’ In other words, ‘Arabia transported agents from the real to the mythical world and their missions from the physical to the metaphysical realm.’ Their Arabia was a phantasmagoria, ‘a *utopia*, a no-place’.<sup>108</sup> Imperial spies embarked on their journeys to

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>102</sup> Ibidem, p. 165. Cf. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-‘Alwaḡī, ‘Al-Mis Bil’, p. 23.

<sup>103</sup> Tamara Chalabi contends that Bell also perceived King Fayṣal as her child, ‘a toy she would play with, educate, admire, and scold.’ See Tamara Chalabi, ‘Fragments of a Mirror’, pp. 177–179. Cf. Myriam Yakoubi, ‘Gertrude Bell’s Perception of Faisal I’, p. 208.

<sup>104</sup> Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, p. 311.

<sup>105</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, pp. 95, 97.

<sup>106</sup> Stephen Jankiewicz, ‘Orientalists in Love: Intimacy, Empire, and Cross-Cultural Knowledge’, *Journal of World History* 23/2 (2012), p. 361.

<sup>107</sup> Ibidem, p. 371.

<sup>108</sup> Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, pp. 80, 92, 73.

the cradle of civilization, contemplating its biblical topography rather than its modern-day maps. Being captivated by its ancient myths and polytheistic past, they were ‘raising their fact-finding missions to epic quests.’<sup>109</sup> They perceived the desert as a timeless and mysterious land of tales, a transcendent space to experience their own spiritual essence. They viewed Bedouins as epitomizing primitiveness in the sense of possessing an intuitive wisdom and nobility. By travelling ‘back into historico-mythological time,’ colonial agents were returning to their childhood, ‘a pantheistic world of genies and spirits,’ because they were ‘a generation raised on *The Arabian Nights*.’<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Baghdad, the city of the Caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd and *One Thousand and One Nights*, appeared to them as a magical place. Satia sums up her reflections by saying that ‘British spies in the Middle East were as interested in the deepest secrets of creation as in politically and militarily useful information.’<sup>111</sup> The scholar thus offers a convincing explanation for Bell’s seemingly contradictory motivations.<sup>112</sup>

### Hātūn in the eyes of Iraqi Characters

On the page that follows the title page of *A Quest in the Middle East. Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq*, its author Liora Lukitz quotes Clifford Geertz’s words: ‘Aftershadows of colonialism remain in the minds of both – former masters and former subjects.’<sup>113</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, in turn, starts his narrative in this way:

A hundred years had passed, such a very long time since the English Miss entered Baghdad. Wearing high heels, a wide-brimmed hat, and French clothes, she walked proudly and victoriously. The woman ignited the imagination of Baghdad’s inhabitants. In front of her, she sees British imperial troops on the land she has constantly dreamed about – Mesopotamia. She utters the word ‘Mesopotamia’ passionately as if she was an orchestra conductor playing an eternal melody for this city, fragrant tunes of Baghdad’s sun. Maybe they will melt London’s snow frozen in her heart. She had an appointment with this city scorching her pale body. Iraqis’ eyes open wide while she gives them those cold looks.

<sup>109</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem, p. 91.

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem, p. 97. For more, see the subchapter *The Cultural World of the Edwardian Agent*, pp. 59–97.

<sup>112</sup> In his study on traveler-writers of the mid- and late-19<sup>th</sup> century, exploring the Orient with ‘the sense of belatedness’, Ali Behdad bluntly states that ‘The discursive practices of these belated orientalists are therefore split, for they are inscribed within both the economies of colonial power and the exotic desire for a disappearing Other.’ He clarifies that their discourse ‘simultaneously affirms and exposes the ideological discrepancies and political predicaments of colonial hegemony.’ See Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers. Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Durham–London 1994, p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, p. ii; cf. Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact. Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, Harvard 1995, p. 131.

She observes their primal instincts emitted by the pores in their skins as if they were animals without control over their desires. Is Miss Bell a goddess or a semi-goddess? Baghdad's residents were confused about this woman when trying to recall her white halo that blinded them. They could no longer distinguish between this woman and the deities living in their temples for quite some time.<sup>114</sup>

The above description of Bell's arrival in Baghdad in 1917 signals three narrative perspectives that emerge in Nūrī's novel. The first viewpoint is that of the heroine, a citizen of the British Empire fascinated with the East, a triumphant colonialist who as a White Man looks down on the Other.<sup>115</sup> The second is embodied by the Iraqis of her time, portrayed in the quotation as the indigenous population of the British colony, astonished at the moment of their first encounter with a representative of Western civilization. And the third standpoint is adopted by the current generations of Iraqis, who judge Gertrude Bell in the light of their knowledge of what has happened in their country throughout the century since it was under the British occupation. In the following section, I will devote my attention to the latter two perspectives appearing in *Ḥātūn Baġdād*.

According to Monika Fludernik, colonial fiction often employed internal focalization to evoke the reader's empathy towards the white colonizer. At the same time, representatives of the native population were marginalized and depicted as objects of observation. Postcolonial fiction, for its part, uses this technique to showcase the interiority of the colonized.<sup>116</sup> In comparison, Nūrī's literary text addresses both the colonial discourse by presenting the Orientalist attitude while exposing the heroine's inner experiences and postcolonial discourse through the thoughts and emotions expressed by (her) contemporary Iraqis. Among these Iraqis are women wrapped in black cloaks (*'abāya*), who observe from behind the holes in their house doors this thin woman walking along Baghdad's streets. Only a few dare to open the doors and look curiously at 'that strange creature who attacked their planet without warning.' Some struggle to refrain from laughing in amazement, while others burn incense to drive out this 'genie' (*ġinniyya*) who arrived with the British troops. As several of them put their hands on their mouths as a sign of consternation and astonishment, they wonder whether this strange woman will fly to heaven if she stumbles because of her high heels and falls onto the street. Ultimately, the Iraqi women withdraw inside their houses and start to recite the first chapter of the Quran (*al-Fātiḥa*) to ward off evil spirits.<sup>117</sup>

Baghdad's male residents in Nūrī's fictional work belong primarily to the *efendiyya*, a part of Iraqi society comprising educated civil servants and soldiers. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, effendis strove for social and educational reform and promoted Arab

<sup>114</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 5.

<sup>115</sup> See Monika Fludernik, 'Narrative Forms', p. 907.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 905.

<sup>117</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 5–6.

nationalism, and thus were regarded as a new intelligentsia.<sup>118</sup> In *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, Gertrude Bell is watched by effendis sitting in coffee houses, standing in front of shops, and strolling down the streets as she passes by. They are impressed by her high heels, wide-brimmed hat, and tight dress, but not by her slim silhouette ('like a reed'). These men are attracted to plump women like those presented in 19<sup>th</sup>-century European paintings, copies of which were sold in the Iraqi capital's flea markets following the colonizers' arrival. Effendis hold lively conversations about the strange woman. Some of them claim she is a commander of the imperial army. Others say she is the secretary of the new administrator in Baghdad. Rumor has it that this woman was behind the fall of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>119</sup> After the British crushing of the Iraqi revolution in 1920, effendis admit they did not suppose that this archeologist and expert on Arab tribes would turn into a master who forces Iraqis into exile. In commenting on the imprisonment of Iraqi nationalist poets composing their poems against foreign rule, the effendis argue: 'The fate of those who would open their mouths against Ḥātūn will be known,' for she is 'the uncrowned queen of Baghdad.'<sup>120</sup> The third-person narrator presents their further divagations on Gertrude Bell as follows:

(...) effendis repeat Ḥātūn's name with respect while sitting in dark coffee shops' corners. They call her an exceptional woman and hate when somebody says she is an informant, officer, or spy. (...) "At least she is loyal to our legacy and land. Is this not enough that she wants to establish a museum for us and a library? (...) She loves our treasures but does not want to steal them. Rather, she struggles with French and German thieves to protect them. Is this not enough to bow before her? (...) Would you believe, folks, that she stood against Balfour and his ill-fated Declaration? But do not forget that she is a student of Lord Cromer, one of the pillars of colonialism in the East".<sup>121</sup>

<sup>118</sup> See Eric Davies, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and the Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, Berkeley 2005, p. 41.

<sup>119</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 7–9, 16.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16; see Eric Davies, *Memories of State*, pp. 41–49; 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, 'Al-Mar'a al-latī anša't dawla', p. 12.

<sup>121</sup> Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 18–19. It is worth noting that Bell wrote in her letters how she was perceived by Arabs, and particularly Iraqis, which is also mentioned in her biographies. For example, Janet Wallach indicates that Arabs called her *Umm al-Mu'mīnīn*, 'Mother of the Faithful', an expression usually used regarding 'Ā'īša, the Prophet Muhammad's wife. King Faisal was supposed to have said to Gertrude: *Anti 'irāqīyya, anti badawīyya* (You are an Iraqi woman, you are a Bedouin woman). Nūrī Sa'īd, his advisor, stated when he saw her ride a horse greeted by people on the road that there was only one Ḥātūn and that Iraqis would talk about her for the next hundred years. See Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen*, pp. 285, 350, 395, 456, 463–464; cf. Liora Lukitz, *Quest in the Middle East*, p. 166. Similarly, the heroine in Nūrī's novel cites what Iraqis say about her. See Šākīr Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 89, 111. As a comparison, in the documentary *Letters from Baghdad*, there are representatives of Iraqi society (the actors playing them speak Arabic) among the personalities sharing their reflections about Bell (or generally about the British occupation). For example, a woman attending a party organized by Bell for wives of Iraqi notables in 1920 describes Ḥātūn as a kind woman who adapts easily to the way of being of Arab women. At the same time, she remarks that Bell could be strict and gave orders to Iraqi men, which they did not like.

The perspective of present generations of Iraqis is epitomized by five characters enchanted with Gertrude Bell. For them, she is an icon of the past, symbolizing ‘the good old times’ in the face of destruction initiated by the American-led occupation. It does not mean, however, that they are uncritical of her deeds. In a subchapter entitled *The National Library*, one of these men, Abū Socrates, enters the library with the Venezuelan Fernando soon after it was looted and set on fire by unknown persons in 2003. They search for burned books scattered among the bookshelves and talk about manuscripts from the golden age of Arabic culture, the Abbasid era, and the millions of other books from various epochs, and clay tablets lost in the flames. Abū Socrates wonders how the West dared to destroy the country that had taught the world reading and writing millennia ago.<sup>122</sup> In the following subchapter, entitled *Icons in the Wind*, Fernando confesses in a further discussion with Abū Socrates he did not know that Bell had founded The Peace Library, subsequently transformed into the National Library.<sup>123</sup> The Venezuelan mentions that even people in his country associate Bell with her being a spy. Abū Socrates suggests that he should read newspapers published immediately after her death, informing about anti-colonial demonstrations organized by effendis on Baghdad’s streets on the day of her funeral. The Iraqi man comments on that incident, saying that Ḥātūn probably erred, seeing only the charm of the Tigris River while forgetting that it also brings floods and devastation. In the same way, she underestimated Iraqis’ resistance, which arose despite her engagement in their interests and loyalty.<sup>124</sup>

Likewise, the contemporary Iraqis meditate on Gertrude Bell as an icon of the past during their meeting in the ‘Mesopotamia’ pub in 2015, when radical Muslim groups’ actions intensified. The protagonists are aware that a suicide bomber might enter the pub, run by a Christian owner, at any time. They wonder whether Bell might have been predicting Iraq’s future when she expressed her concern over the subordination of its inhabitants, predominantly Shiite, to religious leaders. The five men claim they want to understand Bell better, and hence themselves, by reading her words.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, they also recall Ḥātūn and her deeds every time they talk about various phenomena in the surrounding reality. When they reflect, for instance, on pervasive nepotism, corruption, and the mass selling of forged documents in Baghdad’s markets, they say: ‘(...) this aristocratic English woman drew maps, installed kings, sold dreams, and expelled Turkish pashas. She liberated us from the darkness. And we have been waiting for her to expel the corrupted [officials – A.M.] just as she expelled them from the royal palace they had occupied.’<sup>126</sup>

That notwithstanding, the five men ask themselves whether the British occupation of Iraq was the beginning of the present chaos: ‘Ḥātūn Baḡdād kneaded the dough of history and mixed it with geography. Did she make a monster for us while we were sleeping in our comfortable beds? Was she responsible for our devastation and grief?’ They come to the

<sup>122</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baḡdād*, pp. 39–41.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Georgina Howell, *Woman in Arabia*, p. 19.

<sup>124</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baḡdād*, p. 42.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120.

conclusion that perhaps Iraqis do not deserve a better reality than the one they now have to face. One of them addresses the imaginary Bell in the following way: '(...) You wanted to give us His Majesty the King, but this is too much for us. We belong to the plebs, and monarchy does not fit us because it is a regime for the nobles. What suits us are republics of thieves.'<sup>127</sup> This critical opinion on their compatriots corresponds with what Abū Socrates says to Fernando about the contradictions in Iraqis' personalities.<sup>128</sup> He explains to the Venezuelan that 'an Iraqi can be a rightist and faithful during the day, and a leftist and atheist at night. He goes to the mosque and pub regularly. He defends his honor and commits adultery.'<sup>129</sup>

These characters also juxtapose Iraq's British occupation with the American one repeatedly while debating the legacy of Gertrude Bell.<sup>130</sup> In their view, the former occupation set up a puppet state pulled by imperial strings.<sup>131</sup> Despite that, it left behind libraries, museums, and other traces of modernization. The latter only brought mechanical destruction, reckless damage to everything targeted by American tanks and planes.<sup>132</sup> Manşūr, the guardian of Bell's grave, looks back with fondness at her times: 'Where are the good old days when Baghdad was more sophisticated than in our barbaric times? The city has turned into a rubbish dump. Concrete walls and sandbags cut its roads. The damned

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem, p. 127.

<sup>128</sup> These contradictions were identified by the acclaimed Iraqi sociologist 'Alī al-Wardī. Muhsin al-Musawi draws attention to the term "dichotomy" (*izdiwāğīyya*) used by Al-Wardī in his studies on Iraqi society. The esteemed sociologist investigated Iraqis' complex personalities based on binary oppositions such as nomadism and urbanization, Muslim and tribal values. Al-Musawi gives the example of a tension indicated by al-Wardī between the values propagated by Islam, such as resignation, devotion, and righteousness, and those respected among the Bedouins, such as pride, attachment to lineage, and domination. Moreover, Al-Musawi mentions that al-Wardī noticed a vengeful approach among Iraqis against being exploited, impoverished, and marginalized, in line with the conception of personal qualities formulated by the American psychologist Gardner Murphy. See Muhsin Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, p. 65. See also Jaqueline S. Ismael, 'Ali al-Wardi: The Man and His Interpretation of Iraqi Social History', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 2/2 (2008), pp. 293–295.

<sup>129</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Bağdād*, p. 37.

<sup>130</sup> Such a comparison also appears in non-fictional publications concerning Bell. Georgina Howell maintains that 'If the American and British invaders of 2003, after ousting Saddam Hussein, had read and taken to heart what Gertrude had to say on establishing peace in Iraq, there might have been far fewer of the bombings and burnings that have continued to this day.' See Georgina Howell, *Woman in Arabia*, p. 14. Lisa Cooper, who focuses on Bell's archeological activities, writes that we feel justified today criticizing Bell's assumption of the West's dominant position and moral superiority. Cooper asks, however, 'More than 100 years, when this very landscape within which Bell stood continues to be a raging battleground of clashing nations and ideologies, marked by ongoing and damaging interference from the outside, is anyone really justified in claiming higher enlightenment?' See Lisa Cooper, *In Search of Kings and Conquerors*, p. 240. In his historical publication, Toby Dodge highlights similarities between Iraq's British occupation in the 1920s and the American occupation in the new millennium's early years. By showing 'how key colonial servants, caught up in a rapidly changing international system, understood the society they were interacting with,' Dodge aimed to share his conclusions with the American administrators of post-2003 Iraq. See Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, p. 264: 'This was a new imperial strategy of covert rule, a version of indirect rule in which professional agents operated in a hidden realm of colonial government bureaucracy.'

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Ġā'far al-'Uqaylī, 'Šākir Nūrī'.



American tanks cut its streets.’<sup>133</sup> The same protagonist says that ‘Iraqis have started to venerate Ḥātūn Baġdād after seeing American atrocities.’ He also remarks that ‘She had been resting peacefully in her grave until the Americans awaked her by the racket of their tanks. They smashed the cemetery walls (...).’<sup>134</sup>

The way Nūrī depicts the complex psychic interiority of Gertrude Bell and how his literary characters representing Iraqis of both her times and today perceive the heroine has provoked several questions among Arab literary critics and intellectuals debating *Ḥātūn Baġdād*. What was the author’s intention? Did he want to write a novel about Bell in order to present a foreign perspective on Iraq’s modern history instead of an Iraqi point of view? Did he mean to show the human face of the colonizer? And does he believe that the British occupation was better than the American one?<sup>135</sup> During both the meeting with readers in Amman mentioned above and in a press interview, Nūrī emphasized that he presented history as a story without taking a particular stance towards his protagonists because the ultimate judgment belongs to the readers. By comparing the British and American occupations, he did not mean to glorify the former. ‘Every occupation is an occupation, and what distinguishes one from the other is the manner of exercising it,’ as Nūrī said.<sup>136</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, I propose considering Gertrude Bell a site of memory represented by innumerable media of memory, including scientific studies, non-fictional and fictional works, and films. Through a process of remediation, ongoing for over ninety years and crossing national and cultural boundaries, similar components of Bell’s media images have been replicated. Many of these components were defined at the stage of premediation and condensed to a handful of phrases, like ‘explorer’, ‘spy’, and ‘queen of the desert’. Yet, new elements have been added to these images due to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. Nowadays, this site of memory can be perceived by a different audience worldwide in many ways. Those advocating for gender equality may see Bell primarily as a woman raised in Victorian times who managed to overcome both the limitations of British society and those resulting from her encounters with members of Middle Eastern cultures, patriarchal in their own way. Others, guided by anti-colonial resentments and wanting to settle accounts with their colonial past, may view Bell as a typical representative of the British Empire, driven by the desire to dominate the colonized, etc.

*Ḥātūn Baġdād* is one of the media of memory referring to Gertrude Bell. It participates in the remediation of her earlier images and offers a more nuanced reading of this site of

<sup>133</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 128.

<sup>134</sup> Ibidem, pp. 128–129, also 177–178.

<sup>135</sup> See Nīrān al-‘Abīdī, ‘Šākir Nūrī kataba riwāyat Ḥātūn Baġdād’; Manāl ‘Abd al-Aḥad, ‘Šākir Nūrī yaktašif sirr «Ḥātūn Baġdād»’, *Al-Ḥayāt*, 26 May 2017, Viewed 29 July 2021, <<https://www.sauress.com/alhayat/22049578>>.

<sup>136</sup> Ġa‘far al-‘Uqaylī, ‘Šākir Nūrī’; ‘Ishār riwāyat “Ḥātūn Baġdād”’.

memory by placing it in a specific context. Nūrī's novel constructs a representation of Bell within Arabic fiction essentially addressed to Iraqis and other Arabic language readers. To do so, the Iraqi author resorted to earlier media of memory of Miss Bell. Some of her writings and selected scientific publications in different languages served to provide him with historical information. Bell's letters, which have constituted a significant point of reference for her biographers and researchers in various fields, likewise played a critical role in Nūrī's writing process. They facilitated his portrayal of the heroine's inner world and influenced the structure of his literary text. Werner Herzog's film, in turn, becomes a topic of discussion among the contemporary male characters in the fictional work, providing an excellent example of intermedial reference.

Having familiarizing himself with diverse media of memory related to Gertrude Bell, the Iraqi writer incorporated several standard components of her media images in his novel, making reference to certain happenings in her life and historical events she witnessed, and to her personal and professional relationships. In portraying the heroine's inner experiences, Nūrī took into consideration aspects indicated by scholars who have investigated Orientalist discourse through analysis of Bell's words, from both her private letters to her beloved ones and her writings for the general public – travelogues, reports, and other official texts. In *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, the main protagonist uses expressions specific to Orientalist discourse when pondering Western colonialism in the Middle East. She states, for example, that the British order replaced Ottoman corruption and that Arabs are incapable of self-government without the Empire's protective support. However, Nūrī also emphasizes Bell's ambivalent approach towards 'the Orientals', just like some of her biographers do. His literary character oscillates between a desire to help Iraqis owing to her emotional attachment to them and the need to patronize them because of her steadfast belief in the colonial civilizing mission.

Although *Ḥātūn Baġdād* echoes other media of memory referring to Gertrude Bell, it should be seen primarily as a specific literary medium. It features the contents of her media representations in the form of Modern Standard Arabic, in sentences containing a multitude of figures of speech. Compared to Allan Gold, the author of an anglophone novel about Bell, the Iraqi writer paid greater attention to synthesizing a number of media, literary and artistic genres, and employed a wider variety of techniques, frequently used in postmodern novels. Nūrī thereby avoids writing a typical historical novel revolving around the heroine's life against a 'realistic' backdrop of the socio-political events of her times. Instead, he presents the existential situation of this protagonist. Moreover, he juxtaposes colonial and postcolonial discourses in order to show that as the Orientalist expert is perceiving the Other, she is also being seen by the colonized.

In reference to Frantz Fanon's considerations on racial and cultural stereotypes about the Negroid population in colonial discourse in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Homi Bhabha remarks that 'there is always the alienating other (or mirror) which crucially returns its image to the subject.'<sup>137</sup> The metaphor of the mirror seems pivotal also with

<sup>137</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 81.

respect to Nūrī's novel. As previously mentioned, a Bedouin says to the heroine that she is the mirror of his nomadic community's life. Additionally, the five men sitting in the 'Mesopotamia' pub in 2015 and discussing Bell's legacy conclude that they want to understand her in order to be able to comprehend themselves. The Iraqi novelist thus makes the literary character of Gertrude Bell a mirror in which his compatriots look at themselves.<sup>138</sup> He also makes her a point of reference in a reflection on Iraqis' fate for over a century. During this period, their country went a long way, from the British Mandate of Iraq and the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, through the First Iraqi Republic of 1958, successive Ba'athist republics and Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, to the democracy imposed by the Americans in the post-invasion era, accompanied by chaos caused by sectarian strife and radical Islamic terrorism. By juxtaposing 'how it was before' with 'how it is today', Nūrī opens up new possibilities for reading Gertrude Bell's site of memory in the Iraqi context. The author of *Ḥātūn Baġdād* does not diminish the impact of Iraq's former and latter occupations on the lives of its citizens. Instead, he suggests contemplating the responsibility of the previous and present generations of Iraqis for their state's current condition.

In his novel, Nūrī proposes reconsidering Bell's place in Iraq's modern history. He calls into question the simplistic way of seeing her as a colonial agent. He seems to ask provocatively: 'Would it be possible to regard Gertrude Bell as an icon of Iraq's past thanks to her achievements in the protection of Iraqi culture?' Interestingly, the word 'icon' appears in his literary text several times. The closing scene of *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, which describes the last night of Gertrude's life, ends with the following sentence: 'Let her sleep in peace amidst the icons of Baghdad.'<sup>139</sup> In another passage of Nūrī's fictional work, Abū Socrates enumerates 'icons in which he believes.'<sup>140</sup> Among them are the Freedom Monument (*Nuṣb al-Ḥurriyya*)<sup>141</sup> and the Mural of the People (*Ġidāriyyat*

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Al-Muṭannā aš-Šayḥ 'Atiyya, 'Riwāyat al-'irāqī Šākir Nūrī «Ḥātūn Baġdād»: mir'āt aš-šaḥsiyya al-'irāqiyya fī haḡsihā bi-al-mustaqbal ad-dāmi', *Al-Quds al-'Arabī*, 24 August 2019, Viewed 29 July 2021, <<https://www.alquds.co.uk/رواية العراقية شاكر نوري خاتون بغداد م>>.

<sup>139</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, p. 209.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>141</sup> This is the most famous monument in Baghdad, located at Liberty Square (*Ṣaḡat al-Ḥurriyya*) and built by the renowned Iraqi sculptor Ġawād Salīm in 1959–1962. The Freedom Monument was erected after the statutes of General Maude, 'the conqueror of Baghdad' in 1917, and King Fayṣal, regarded as symbols of British colonialism, were demolished. *Nuṣb al-Ḥurriyya* was unveiled by 'Abd al-Karīm Qāssim, leader of the Iraqi Revolution of 1958 that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy. The monument symbolizes the revolution and refers to various stages of the country's history, including its Sumerian, Assyrian, and Islamic past. Its twenty-five bronze statues represent ideas such as injustice, resistance, solidarity, hope, ambition, maternity, etc. This is the only public monument that has survived the political changes of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the new millennium's first two decades. Elie Podeh, *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East*, Cambridge 2011, p. 125; Nada Shabout, 'Whose Space Is It?', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (14 February 2014), p. 164, Viewed 10 August 2021, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/whose-space-is-it/ED995C1EAFE733ACA8A4624D9BB41D7D>>.

*Fā'iq Ḥassan*).<sup>142</sup> While meditating on the phenomenon of erecting monuments and destroying them during revolutions and political changes, Abū Socrates wonders whether it makes sense to build a monument to Bell.<sup>143</sup> What is more, in one of the last subchapters, the omniscient narrator recounts:

Ḥātūn has been watching the Freedom Monument, the Mural of the People, the Monument of Pilots, the 'Mesopotamia' pub, and other monuments and places from her grave. People bow their heads when passing by the British Cemetery walls to express their respect for what she achieved: electing the king, founding the museum, establishing the Peace Library, writing the constitution, and other tasks. These achievements are a kind of spiritual ziggurat. Iraqis have been climbing its floors and stairs with canes hoping to arrive somewhere but in vain.<sup>144</sup>

With the above in mind, it seems reasonable to call Šākir Nūrī's fictional work 'a novel of the historical imagination' that aims at asking existential questions about historical events.

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<sup>142</sup> The Mural located at the Aviation Square was created by Fā'iq Ḥassan in the early 1960s. As an exemplar piece of Social Realism, it presents the cultural diversity of postrevolutionary Iraqi society. See Nada Shabout, 'Whose Space Is It?', pp. 164–165.

<sup>143</sup> Šākir Nūrī, *Ḥātūn Baġdād*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

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