



# The Trauma of the Arab Individual and the Limitations of Nation-State: A Case Study of the Iraqi Nation in Inaam Kachachi's *Tashari*

Nawal Ameen Ali Naji Al-Shelh

Department of English,

Osmania University, Hyderabad.

## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to shed light on the trauma of the Arab individual in the age of modern nationalism in the Arab context. It takes the Iraqi context as a framework through studying Inaam Kachachi's novel *Tashari* (The Dispersal) (2013). The fragmentation of the Iraqi nation and the pains and sufferings of the Iraqi individuals are tackled in this paper through the story of the main character in the novel, Wardiyah Iskandar, who is forced to leave her country for France as a refugee as well as her children and many other Iraqi people who flee the country because of the wars, sectarian conflicts and the American invasion. More importantly, the paper also unmasks the limitations of the nation-state in the Arab world taking the Iraqi state as an example where the sub-state identities prevailed over the central government.

**Keywords:** *Tashari*, Inaam Kachachi, Nation-state, Colonialism, Sectarianism, Trauma, Arab individual, fragmentation.

## Introduction:

The western colonialists applied the divide-and-rule policy in the Arab World. This sort of policy started with the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 that happened secretly between the British and French with the approval of Russia during the First World War. In other words, they dismembered the legacy of the "Sick Man of Europe" referring to the Ottoman Empire that declined with the advent of the twentieth century and was dismantled during the First World War. They controlled the Arab region that was under the Ottoman rule and thwarted the Arabs' plans of achieving their dream of establishing a united Arab nation that spans from the Arab Gulf in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west after they gained their independence from the Ottomans.

Through Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), they drew the borders for the current Arab states illogically and divided the Arab world into several territories without the consent of the Arabs who inhabited these regions. After this division, Britain controlled Jordan, Iraq, and Palestine, besides Egypt, Sudan, and south of Yemen, while France took Syria and Lebanon besides Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. There was no logic for dividing these territories; the borders were drawn for the new states according to polarising elements rather than similar elements that help in making them one people who can establish a successful nation; for instance, they put different religions, ethnicities, and sects within one state in order to ensure constant wars and conflicts, which lead in the future to more fragmentations within these states.

In addition to that, they helped the minorities to rule the majorities such as in Iraq and Syria. Iraq, for example, is a country of Shia sect majority and the men in power are Sunna, while Syria is a country of Sunna sect majority and the men in power are Shia. Through this kind of religious complications, the colonial mechanism intensified the fragmentation of the Arab World as a whole and within the Arab states individually so as to maintain their domination on these fragmented and weak states and control their trade routes and natural resources especially oil. Iraq is one of these colonially created states which will be discussed in this paper through the novel of Inaam Kachachi *Tashari* (The Dispersal). In her novel, Kachachi addresses the issue of the trauma and suffering of the Iraqi people. It addresses the Iraqi diaspora that was a result of religious and sectarian conflicts that prevailed in the country in the past few decades. These conflicts led to the dispersal of the Iraqi people around the world as the title of the novel, *Tashari* (The Dispersal) suggests.

### ***Tashari*: Author**

Inaam Kachachi is an Iraqi journalist and author born in Baghdad in 1952. She got her Doctorate in Philosophy from Sorbonne University and she works currently as a correspondent for Ashraq Al-Awsat newspaper in London and she works also for the Family Magazine in Sharjah, UAE. She wrote many books and novels in which she documented the sufferings of the Iraqi people during the crises and wars, one of which is *Tashari* (The Dispersal) (2013).

### ***Tashari*: Context**

Due to its two great rivers, Iraq was the cradle of the oldest human civilisation in the world as people gathered on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and started the Babylonian, Chaldeans, and the Assyrian civilisations; besides, Iraq occupies an important strategic location that led many colonial powers to compete on controlling it in the 19th and 20th centuries like Britain, France, Turkey, Germany, and Russia. Britain was the first European country that was aware of the strategic location of Iraq as a passageway between East and West. This dates back to 1600 when the British founded the East India Company in 1600 and after they colonised the East Indies region in its broad context.

Noouf Bint Al Rawdan discusses this in her article "The Euphrates Valley Railway Project (1856-1882) Dr. Noouf Bint Rizq Al Rawdan" (2019) the first time the European colonialism attempts to colonise Iraq for its strategic location that made the British attempt to get an "alternative route competing with the French Suez Canal project that was proceed apace which has alarmed England." (Al Rawdan 893). They wanted to build railroad that connects between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arab Gulf and make a short route to India; the British William Andrew asserted in a picture in 1882 that the Euphorates Valley Railway would connect three continents; Europe, Asia, and Australia, besides connecting the Indian sub-continent to Europe.

The competition continued after the discovery of oil in the Arab region and particularly in the Gulf countries and Iraq as discussed by Al Rawdan. This affected the inhabitants of this region who remained fragmented and weak when the British and French colonials enhanced the conflicts between the different religious, sectarian and ethnic groups from one side within Iraq; Muslims and Christians; Sunna and Shia; Arabs, Kurds, and Assyrians. On the other side, they were working on preventing Iraq from joining the Arab nationalist project of uniting the Arab states into one nation that was led by the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. This resulted in the isolation and fragmentation of the Iraqi nation.

Iraq's nation-building strategy focused more on finding sectarian representatives than on overcoming the sectarian divisions according to Hareth Hasan in his article "Iraq's sectarian crisis: a legacy of exclusion" (2014). He mentions that violence and tension between Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds continue to threaten Iraq's stability and fragile democracy. He suggests that Iraq needs a political charter that should be based basically on individual citizens than on sectarian identities.

### **Tashari: Analysis**

*Tashari* (The Dispersal) (2013) is originally written in Arabic and translated into English, French and Italian. It was shortlisted in the final list of the International Award of the Arabic novel in 2014. It is a postcolonial novel which addresses the religious and sectarian conflicts, identity fragmentation, loss of home, and sense of belonging of the Iraqi people who are either displaced within Iraq or who take refuge outside of it. This is represented in the story of an Iraqi family, the members of which have been dispersed in different parts of the world. The term "tashari", which is the title of Kachachi's novel, literally means the shot that is fired from a hunting rifle and scatters to different directions. This term is used in Arabic in the Iraqi dialect to indicate dispersion and fragmentation. In the novel context, it refers to people who are divided and fragmented due to political and sectarian conflicts which result in the country's citizens' dispersal in different parts of the world. Inaam Kachachi used this term because it is the most appropriate term to describe the life and suffering of the Iraqi people and their displacement inside Iraq and diaspora outside of it through her novel *Tashari* (The Dispersal) (2013).

The novel narrates the story of three generations; the grandmother, her children, and then her grandchildren. The story takes place in Iraq and France. It narrates the life of a family that has been moving to different cities inside Iraq till they decide to travel out of Iraq, leaving their homeland behind in search of a better home where they can live peacefully. The narrator is Wardiyah Iskandar, the main character of the novel, a female doctor who is born in Mosul and grows up in Baghdad. She works as a gynaecologist in a village in the 1950s. She witnesses the political upheavals and religious and sectarian conflicts which happen in the following decades which worsen the situation across the country and result in forced displacement for her and her family. Like the majority of the Iraqi people who are either displaced or leave the country, Wardiyah eventually leaves Iraq for France.

The novel opens in France where Wardiyah Iskandar is an eighty-year-old female physician, who is forced to leave Iraq after working as a gynaecologist for over 50 years. She goes to visit the Elysee Palace, where there is a rumour that the Christian refugees coming from Iraq are the guests of President Nicolas Sarkozy “doctor Wardiyah sits next to a number of Christian Iraqi refugees to whom the front seats have been allocated. It is said that they are the guests of Sarkozy and they believed the story.” (Kachachi 13) Wardiyah does not believe the story of their being welcomed by the president of France just because they are Christians. She comments on the Pope John Paul whom she loves before “until the day when he retreats from visiting Ur in which Ibrahim al-Khalil was born. She does not forgive him, for he arrived to Iraqi borders. Then he turned around and went back to where he came from, leaving the Iraqi Christians to suffer” (Kachachi 14)

Wardiyah looks at the beauty of the Elysee Palace and remembers her late husband and her children who are dispersed around the world because of the wars and conflicts in Iraq. She wishes if her husband is alive; her children who dispersed across three continents come from Canada, America, and the United Arab Emirates as well as people of her acquaintance from al-Diwaniya province in Iraq to come to escort her to the Elysee Palace in France:

She raised her head contemplating the chandeliers and the golden inscriptions and the exquisite drawings that decorate the hall ceiling; she wished if her late husband Girgis were with her, holding her cold hand... If her daughter Handah boarded the plane from Canada and escorted her to the Elysee, if her son Barraq came from that distant island and held her arm, if her daughter Yasmine ascended Dubai Tower and jumped to her, if all the residents of Diwaniya whom she knows... If all of them were standing by her side and supported her. (Kachachi 16).

This shows how the Iraqi people suffer because of the wars, political crises, sectarian and religious conflicts. For instance, Wardiyah's case where her three children have to forcibly leave Iraq and disperse across three continents. Ultimately, she herself ends up forced to leave her country, people and job for France after crossing eighty years of age all the way by herself.

Wardiyah exclaims about the local time in each city where her family members and her country are compared to the time in France. Then she laments the situation to which the Iraqis had to be in, where they are forced to leave their country and scatter around the world. Then she compares Iraq to a human body, whereas she compares colonialism and sectarianism and religious conflicts that have been enhanced by the colonials in Iraq to a butcher that rips off the body of Iraq; whereas she compares the Iraqi people to the body organs. The butcher or colonialism rips off the body of Iraq and disperses its people all over the globe. Then she compares the Evil witch to the Sectarian conflicts and wars that disturbs the peace of Iraq, which has been in peace for thousands of years, and scatters its people all over the world including the narrator herself, Wardiyah; they do not know who took them out of their country that is a paradise and brought them to these places. Wardiyah herself is not able to figure out who brings her here in France:

Time is 7:00 A.M in Paris, 9:00 in Baghdad, 10:00 in Dubai, where time is still yesterday midnight at Manitoba, and 01:00 A.M in Haiti. As if a butcher took a machete and ripped it off into shreds and dispersed the pieces all over the places. He threw the liver to North of America; then he tossed the lungs to the Caribbean and left the arteries floating on the waters of the Gulf. For the heart, the butcher took his thin and sharp knife that is used in delicate operations; he uprooted with it the heart and lifted it cautiously from its place between the Euphrate and the Tigris rivers and rolled it away under the Eiffel Tower while he is giggling for what he has committed with his hands. Then the tourists chase her heart with their feet as if it was a ball. Their children try to catch it. It is swollen and apt to be played with. It can be kicked with feet, throw to the net or throw towards the basket. What will harm with little animation? (Kachachi 17)

Here she applies magic realism in describing the situation as discussed by Aseel K. Alrikabi in her article "A Study of Inam Kachachi's Novel Tashari as Diaspora Literature" (2018):

She resorts to magic realism where reality becomes more exotic than imagination and the unreasonable becomes reasonable. The novel combines reality and imagination, seriousness and humor by using verbal or spatial magic when Kachachi describes Iraq as a body cut by a butcher as well as spatial images when she talks about the suppositional e-cemetery, which will be mentioned later in this research. She employs verbal magic when she treats metaphors as a reality and moves through the folds of her mind between past and present,

reality and fantasy. Kachachi manipulates an irreducible magic to satirize the colonizers by portraying them as a bloodthirsty butcher or a witch feeding on the bodies of her victims and dispersing them by her sporadic magic wand. At the same time, she employs a realistic description that stresses the disasters encountered Iraq after 2003 as if they were common phenomena; hence, she revises the marvelous. Kachachi draws the readers between two views of reality in Iraq after/before the 2003 occupation— a tragic realistic view as well as a cynical magic catastrophic view alternatively. (Alrikabi 5)

This proves that nationalism in the Arab world is limited and subject to fail because it proved to be unable to protect its citizens from wars, political crises, continuous conflicts that make people leave the country to search for a better place that could give them home and peace. The state also proved its illegitimacy as it could not protect its people from internal conflicts that are fuelled by outsider powers such as Britain, France, America and Iran. People divide and sub-identities are prevalent with continuous wars and conflicts among them. The state has no power to suppress the causes of these divisions and make people equal before the law. National identity in Iraq is fractured as Khalil Osman in his book, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation Since 1920* (2014) mentions that:

It is true that the fragmentation of national identity in Iraq has yet to usher in a total collapse of the notion of a coherent collective Iraqi self. Iraqis, in general, continue to think of themselves as possessing a singular, binding Iraqi identity. It is also natural that Iraqis' subjectivities be informed by a plurality of sub-national, such as sectarian, tribal, regional, and other identities. But federalist schemes in Iraq tend to be informed by ethno-sectarian concepts of identity, or "imagined identities," that are incompatible with the notion of a coherent and unified national identity. The manner in which the debate over federalism has been unfolding in Iraq, as a relational territorial space between communities, gives shape and expression to antagonistic notions of collective identity. Thus, the proliferation of federalist schemes in Iraq underscores the failure of the state-centric discourses, policies and practices of homogenization of the modern nation-state. In other words, it indicates the failure of the modern nation-state in subsuming an assemblage. (Osman 291-292)

As it is observed above that the Iraqi nation proved to be a failing nation as its inhabitants do not identify themselves with the central government as Hans Kohn argues "Nationalism is inconceivable without the ideas of popular sovereignty" and that "the aspect of the universe and of society had to be secularized with the help of a new natural science and of natural law", However, in the case of Iraq, people are more loyal to their sub-state identities specifically religion and sectarianism and then ethnicity. The government could not secularise the Iraqi society because people have been divided on sectarian basis within the state of Iraq. Moreover, it failed to equalise between the masses and put them in one group under the umbrella of the state as Hans Kohn also asserts that "the process of integration of the masses of the people into a common political form" (Kohn

99) and that nationalism “presupposes the existence, in fact or as an ideal, of a centralized form of government over a large and distinct territory” (Kohn 99)

Nevertheless, common people are not really represented in the scenario. Both of the government and the parties of the conflict do not represent people. In other words, people are mere victims of these conflicts; they undergo pains and sufferings and they get either killed or displaced. This has been described in Kachachi’s novel which shows the effect of colonialism and its aftermath on the Iraqi individuals; it reflects on how sectarianism and political conflicts that have been fuelled by colonialism fragmented the Iraqi nation and dispersed its people around the globe. She compares sectarianism to a butcher who cuts off the organs of the nation and throw them in different corners of the world as well as she compares sectarianism to an evil witch:

The butcher disappears and an evil witch comes out of the animation film. She grabs the magic stick. She lifts it up into the air and then hits with it a place in a land that was fertile, safe from the earthquake, guarded between two rivers, contains one million palm trees, replete with black gold, perched on the nozzle of ambiguously divided Gulf between Arabs and Persians... The witch ravages and disperses the people of that country to the four corners of the world. She dissipates them among the maps and they are giddy. They don't understand what happens to them. She wants to retaliate from them because she is ugly and evil while they are easy and tolerance... Even the narrator of this story herself does not know how she came to France. (Kachachi 18)

The witch here stands for colonialism that enhanced and fuelled the differences within the Iraqi nation which afflicts the Iraqis with wars and conflicts that forces them to leave their country without their consent to leave it. Just like the narrator herself, Wardiyah Iskandar who always refuses to go out of Iraq; however, she eventually yields and leaves Iraq and seeks refuge in France.

The novel ends with describing the situation of Iraq and how people continue leaving Iraq because it is not a safe place for its people to live in anymore; with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the situation gets worse in the sectarian conflicts prevail. Murders and killing happen every day:

Wardiyah gave up on her clinic when she could not feel safe for her life there. The Americans entered Iraq. Their troops filled the street; anarchy prevailed in place of system. The yellow wind became stronger. Tell me what is your belief and I will tell you who you are. Days pass and assassinations begin to take place in clinics and in front of the houses. Doctors flee from the country and go to work in Jordan, Libya, the Arab Gulf countries, Canada and Britain. Her nieces leave Baghdad one after another and dispersed all over the country. Tounis’s two daughters did the same. The eldest son of Kamalah left

with his wife and his daughter to work as a physician in Oakland. After years his brother left after him.  
(Kachachi 249)

Corruption also prevails, where many parties emerge, extorting the country wealth's are done by the leaders of these parties and sects. The individuals are confused not knowing whom to follow; they do not know who is right and who is wrong. People get lost; they are incapable of identifying who is with them and who is against them. This leads Wardiyah to give up and leaves her clinic and country and travel to France:

Everything comes altogether. Parties, sects, explosions, the security guards of the officials. Stealing of billions rather than millions. Even the dictators became doctors altogether. She does not know whom to follow and who is the dictator of her sect. She does not know who protects her and who extorts her... She gets tired of everything and yields to the calls of her children and admits that nothing tempts her to continue living in a place that does not belong to her and she does not belong to it anymore. She leaves the country carrying with her letters, photos, telephone numbers, the house deed, the death certificate of her husband, Girgis. She arrived to Paris and decided to believe the rumor that they are the guests of Sarkozy as she hates the fact her being described as a refugee who is considered to be oppressed or exiled. (Kachachi 251)

As described in the above quote, even though she leaves Iraq for France, she still carries with her the house deed which is a symbol for the return. She does not give up her country. There is a hope within the misery with which the Iraqis live in exile. They carry Iraq within them and keep following the news about the events in their country. The inherently believe that sooner or later, colonialism and sectarianism and whoever support will disappear and the people of the country are the ones who will retrieve their land and build their country again as they are carrying with them their houses deeds with them to prove their ownership of their homes and homeland as Wardiyah does.

The story ends with the Iskandar, the son of Wardiyah's niece, who lives in France with his mother and Wardiyah stays with them. He invents an electronic cemetery in which he buries all the family members who are scattered all over the world in order to comfort Wardiyah who feels sad and overwhelmed for being away from her children and grandchildren when his mother narrates:

Iskandar walks in and heads towards the window and opens it.

You all will die from cigarettes and smoke.

We all will die and you will burry us in your screen. Do you still have space?

His screen expands and becomes an ideal shelter for the passing fears. It became a temporary shelter to a multi-destination death. It is enough to touch the alphabet keys and the small computer will change



into a compass that guides us to the site of our dead who are spread there and gathered here. And whenever a new resident comes carrying with him/ her their skeleton on their shoulders and wearing their misery, their relatives from the dead get out of their electronic tombs and gather around them dancing and singing:

You are welcome... you are welcome. The electronic fairies hurry to him/ her and wash their bones with soaked saffron and hide their skinny bones with palm leaves. He/ she is coming to the gathering of their family and loved ones and they are welcomed by them. (Kachachi 239)

Therefore, the child, Iskandar, achieves the dreams of his grandmother Wardiyah and the rest of the family members to gather in one place. He does so by making an imaginary electronic cemetery, where he buries all the family members and gathers them in their death as it becomes impossible for them to gather while they are alive in this world.

## Conclusion

Through a critical reading of Inaam Kachachi's *Tashari* (The Dispersal) (2013), it is observed that the Iraqi individuals undergo sufferings and torture because of colonialism starting from the Sykes-Picot agreement. According to this accord, they divided the Arab world into several states and enhanced the conflicts between polarizing groups within these colonially created nations to ensure constant wars and fragmentations in these nations one of which is Iraq.

People do not identify themselves with the leaders of the conflicting parties and they do not have a central government that is capable of protecting them from these conflicting parties which makes them vulnerable to be extorted and killed or displaced. They unwillingly leave the country and disperse all over the world but they remain attached to their home land as they carry with them their houses deeds that are the symbol of attachment to their land and their hope of return.

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