Shahrzad Tells her Stories in Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire*

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Abstract

If Shahrzad saved herself and the kingdom from annihilation by offering herself to the avenged king whom she kept him entranced for one thousand and one nights by her stories until the king cured, Raffo's women in her play Nine Parts of Desire are far from curing the ' king' of their time. These women tell their own painful stories to uncover a hidden reality and not imaginative one. Raffo attempts to refigure and to recover the female experience in Iraq where women are painfully experiencing different trauma caused by wars. This play presents a portrait of nine Iraqi women from all walks of life-from the most traditional to the most modern. In her play, Raffo positions herself as a translator, exposing and explaining vividly the kind of life that Iraqi women live, creating a dialogue with the American and the International community. Raffo's play, as defined by John Lahr, a reviewer for The New York, is "an example of how art can make the world eloquently name pain."(Lahr, 2004) Hence, this study aims at exploring how Raffo is able to visualize the Iraqi women's lives through a piece of drama.

Keywords: *Raffo, Nine Parts of Desire, Iraqi women, freedom*

Introduction

Heather Raffo (1970-) is an Iraqi-American actress and a playwright. She was born in Michigan from Iraqi father and Irish American mother. She visited Iraq twice, one when she was only five years and the other one in 1993. During a 1993 visit to the Saddam Art Center in Baghdad, she saw a painting in a back room called "Savagery," which depicted a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. Raffo's curiosity about the artist and the work let her begin interviewing Iraqi women. She conducted many interviews over period of ten years with Iraqi women inside and in exile. The composites she has drawn of their lives - stories of hardship, violence and precarious survival - comprise her play *Nine Parts of Desire* that she wrote in 2003. Raffo creates successfully collage of the lives of nine Iraqi women, weaving their stories together, presenting a mosaic of the lives of these ordinary, yet exceptional, Iraqi women. In her author's note, she writes that "*9 Parts of Desire* was inspired by a life-changing trip I made to Iraq in 1993." Her mentioning the names of a number of cities and

sites she visited during her visit to Iraq, projects a fact that in each part of Iraqi there is sad story, where women, in particular, are victims:

> I visited the Amariya bomb shelter where many Iraqi civilians lost their lives when the shelter became a target in the 1991 war. I went to the Saddam Art Center, the modern art museum of Baghdad, and saw rooms and rooms of billboard-sized portraits of Saddam Hussein. Then I wandered into a back room and there was a haunting painting of a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. Her head was hanging, bowed, and there was a golden light behind her, like a sun. I stood motionless in front of the painting. I felt as though this artist had painted me exactly. The painting was titled "Savagery."(Raffo, http://www.heatherraffo.com/9Parts.html)

This painting, that inspired Raffo, was the creation of the Iraqi famous artist Layla Al Attar. Raffo, however, wanted to connect with the artist. Unfortunately she could not because the artist had been killed by an American air raid in June of 1993, a few months before Raffo's visit. Layla, later on, appeared as one of her characters in her play. The other eight women are activist, doctor, housewife, mother, teenager, mourner, the exile woman and lover.

The significance of the Title:

The enigmatic title of the play comes from a hadith (saying) attributed to Al-Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb (as) — "Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women, and one to men" (Brooks, 1996). The statement, enigmatically expresses fundamental ambivalence toward women: The nine parts of desire can make women superior but also dangerous. However, the title of the play refers also to Geraldine Brooks's *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden Worm of Islamic Women* (1996). Traveling throughout the Middle East, Brooks was able to access a world unavailable to male Western journalists: the world of Muslim women. The narrated stories in this book gave a new glimpse of Muslim's women lives and dispelled many Western stereotypes.

In Raffo's play, the dark irony of this sentiment emerges slowly from the bits and pieces of the stories: The lives of Raffo's women are warped by the one part of male desire that, as John Lahr notes, turns "men into savages--brutes, betrayers, rapists." (Lahr, 2004) The title is so significant as it originally refers to the physical place of Iraqi women in the world, to their desires. It has come to represent the dark ocean of wants of an entire people. For those women liberation remains a major question. In these women's lives, there is this division between freedom and safety: the women have become a country of desires. These

women speak of the desire for friendship and for love, the pain of rejection, the need to memorialize the murdered and to need to survive.

Nine Parts of Desire is one woman show but with different nine characters. In the monologues, Raffo attempts to bring to life nine distinct Iraqi women whose very different tales convey the complex and disturbing reality of being female in modern-day Iraq. Their monologues become a series of overlapping conversations leading to a breakdown in communication reflecting the chaos of Iraq intensifies.

Raffo's realization of being a woman of two different cultures and that she has to compromise these two, let her think of writing a play to let the parts address each other. However, she recalls

> I am an American, but I became aware of myself as an Iraqi--had a sense of myself as "the other"--for the first time during the Gulf War.... I'd walk down the street and overhear people saying, "Let's go fuck the Iraqis." I realized from that point on that my cousins in Iraq--family whom I loved--would be viewed by many Americans as dark and dirty (Cited in Renner, 2005)

Raffo's Women tell their Stories:

In describing the function of literary art, the female critic Trinh Minh-ha (1991:12 Cited in Russell, 2007: 100) maintains that literary art has to be voice of resistance, proclaiming that a literary art has:

> to remind us of [. . .] freedom and to defend it. Made to serve a political purpose, literature places itself within the context of the proletarian fight, while the writer frees himself from his dependence on the elites – or in a wider sense, from any privilege – and creates, so to speak, an art for an unrestricted public known as 'art for the masses.'

Hence, theatre as a literary art can enact the human being's time and place that define such resistance. Raffo in Nine Parts of Desire shows awareness of her women's needs of freedom, of resistance, and of discovering and articulating their own experience.

Raffo presents women who suffer from cruel world of wars, of materialism, of political agenda, and of capitalism. Her play gives a complex picture of the Iraqi-American relationship contextualized by Iraqi history in the last 50 years. In one of her interviews, Raffo

says she wanted "American audiences to ... understand how difficult it is to grasp the psyche of people who have lived under Saddam for 30 years with American support, then had a war with Iran, resulting in 1.5 million deaths, followed by 13 years of sanctions and two wars under American firepower."

By expressing the ordeal of their lives, these Iraqi women who represent diverse population, events, histories and experience write their own history as it is never written before. The history of war and its effect that is regarded as male discourse and where women are hidden, it is now uncovered by these women. Terry Teachout (2005) in her article “Invisible Women” praises Raffo’s plays, saying that "Heather Raffo. . .brings us closer to the inner life of Iraq than a thousand slick-surfaced TV reports.” In the same vein, Lahr (2004) describes the welcomed impact of Nine Parts of Desire, declaring that “The first Gulf War came to us via satellite and without words. The road to Basra—the totem of that military cakewalk—was a silent spectacle of incineration. Now, in the second Gulf adventure, Americans can hear the war, but the wall of silence around the female experience of carnage remains more or less intact.”(Lahr , 2004)

Raffo’s play is an attempt to shattering the walls of silence, portraying the life of brutalized, so that to give new and real image of what was going on in the land of civilization. However, understanding the humanistic image and portraying the pain is only possible if the dramatist or the writer is standing aside as critical observer, beyond the authoritative cultural discourse. Raffo’s straddling between two cultures in her play, and her position as an intermediary and messenger, help her to represent alternative discourses that create a cultural conversation. In her play, Raffo tries to heal her women from their trauma, for narrating one's trauma is a necessary step in the healing process, but having someone else frame, contextualize, and narrate it in the poetic language of metaphors and symbols can have both a liberating and numbing experience. (Magda, 2010)

Under Saddam regime and for more than a generation, Iraqi people lived in a state of ‘permanent paranoia’, which created fear of being expressible. The artist Layla who survived by painting portraits of Saddam and painting nudes, declares that "Iraqis know they don’t open their mouth, not even for the dentist.” (Raffo’s Nine Parts of Desire, 2003: 13) The same thing is for the fat Bedouin woman, Amal where the very act of expressing her feelings of hapless love is considered liberation to her, "This is most free moment of my life. Really I mean this," she says, after admitting, "I have never talked this before. Nobody here knows this thing about me. I keep in my heart only."

Mullaya

She stars her play with the Mullaya a—a professional mourner whose improvised verse about the dead is meant, according to the stage directions, "to bring the women to a crying frenzy"—. Sigmund Freud has connected between trauma and mourning, claiming that mourning can be both healthy and unhealthy. The healthy one when it comes in its true time and lasts for a definite period and eventually finds closure; unhealthy mourning is a prolonged mourning that turns later on to be melancholia, manifesting itself through a variety of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Reinelt and Roach, 2007: 424)

This Mullaya "carries a great bundle on her head. She empties her load of shoes into the fiver"; she mumbles that:

> Early in the morning/ Early in the morning
> I come to throw dead shoes into the river
> Today the river must eat/ This river is the color of worn soles (p.3)

Mullaya lyrical invocation elevates the water to be a metaphor not just of the lost promise of the Garden of Eden "Where is anything they said there would be?", but of the emotional relinquishments of all women "Underneath my country there is no paradise of martyrs only water, a great dark sea of desire, and I will feed it my worn sole". (Nine Parts, p. 3). Moreover, starting with Mullaya might also refer to a historical fact that Iraq is the land of sadness, due to the successive stages of Iraq's troubled history. . Iraq, "the land between the two rivers", who is rich in his natural resources, has been destroyed by centuries of conflict: from the Ottoman Empire to British rule, from Saddam's regime, the Iraq-Iran war, and Shi'ite and Sunni conflicts to the first American invasion and international sanctions, to the full American occupation. Her placing the shoes of the dead in the river that runs through Iraq since recorded Iraqi history and the juxtaposition of soles / souls of the dead are representative.

Mullaya is usually hired by others, but her Raffo has not tell us who hired her and whom she is mourning. It seems that Mullaya laments a whole nation, its culture, its history and its people. This prolonged mourning encompasses trauma as a national experience and as a source of national identity since all Iraqis share the same the traumas of loss. Moreover, starting with such lyrical mourning is startling for the audience, as it emphasizes the tragedy of Iraq.

Nine Parts of Desire presents a universal theme, it is not only about the ordeal of Iraqi women; rather, it is about the women across the culture since to many women all wars are the same. Nine Parts of Desire narrates a traumatic experience that transcends its historical and geographical framework. Yet, the play shows that women in our world have no right to

experience their total freedom. The artist Layla who is described as sexy and elegant woman, says:

> I will never leave/ Not for freedom you do not even have.
> Call me what you like, look at me how you will
> I tell you/So many women have done the same as me
> Everywhere they have to do the same.
> If I did the same in your England or America
> Wouldn't they call me a whore there too?
> Your Western culture, sister, will not free me
> From being called a whore/Not my sex
> Women are not free. (p .6-7)

It is said that Layla's character is a reflection to a real Iraqi artist Layla Al Attar who created the mosaic doormat with the face of George Bush the father and that used to adorn the Rashid hotel entrance in Baghdad. Layla who also described as a friend of the old regime, has been killed by US air strike in 1993.

This fictional character of Layla appears with a contradictory identity; she is a sympathizer or a collaborator and a critic and victim of the regime. Such trap does not help her to maintain a coherent self-image. Moreover, this contradicting shows her traumatic and the kind of horror that Layla has suffered from, that she does not dream but of survival. She rhetorically asks "Isn't everything in this country a matter of survival?" (p.10) Since woman is marked by patriarchal norms, to survive she has to negotiate her gendered position vis-à-vis the oppressor, and this experience per se can be traumatizing. What intensified her traumatic state is the unforgotten stories that she witnessed or heard saying that, "These stories are living inside of me/each woman I meet her or I hear about her/and I cannot separate myself from them" (p.9). She silently witness one of her friends being taken by the old regime and stripped, covered by honey, and eaten by Dobermans.

Layla wants to survive, to live freely, yet she rejects leaving Iraq, despite having the means to do so, she says, "I don't know/maybe I feel guilty/all of us here/it's a shame if all the artists leave too". This burden of guilt, accompanied by a profound self-awareness, she bears is making her expecting the universal justice that contradicts the immoral world that surrounded her. She says, "I am aware that I will die./ I am complicit."

Amal

These women's speech of love and peace is intermingled with the sound of tanks, of bullets, and of women and children's crying. Amal articulates ideas that picture the passions of desert simple people:

> I see with my heart/not with my eyes./I am Bedouin /
> I cannot tell you if a man is fat or if a man is handsome
> only I can tell you if I love this man or not
> I think you see with your heart like a Bedouin.(p.10)

Amal's character is a seeker of freedom and change. She leaves Iraq to marry a man in London, but she decides to leave London and return back after her husband's betrayal with one of her friend. Then she gets married an Israeli tribesman, a friend of her father. She leaves him because he wouldn't keep his promise to leave the Middle East and go to Canada. She says, “"I am looking for this freedom/and he says 'No, we are not going to Canada.'/So I care very much for him, but again/I left" (p.11).

Then she returns back to Baghdad and begins a phone relationship with a friend of her ex-husband. After a year they finally meet in Dubai, but he rejects her. Too ashamed to return back to Iraq and meet her family, Amal decides to return to her first husband in London, thinking that she can get more freedom, peace or love. Amal is desperately searching for someone to listen to her, to fill the void she feels deeply. She thinks naively that when she will find the man, the void will be vanished: “ I do, I very much feel this void/I have no peace/Always I am looking for peace"(p.11).

Huda, a fifty-year-old Iraqi intellectual in London, speaks more like a Westerner, with grammatically correct usage of words and phrases. Her harsh western vernacular separates her from other characters. She voices her experience:” Saddam was the worst enemy to the people than anybody else./He beheaded 70 women for being prostitutes, /but he made them prostitutes./Saddam's stooges, they'd kidnap a woman just going from her car to her house/ and take her as a slave, sex slave…” (p.17)

Though, she has left Iraq a long time ago, she still indulges in her past painful traumatic memories from her old country. When Saddam's Ba'th came to power in 1963, Huda with other members of opposition were arrested and thrown into prison:”We could hear things, all night, always rape/or rape with electronic instruments./But their way, I promise you, their way/was to torture the people close to you/that is how they'd do it. (p.18)

Huda tries to fight these brutal memories; nevertheless, she somehow grows numb to them. Her addiction to alcohol might be an escape from her memories and from her contradictions inside herself. Politically, she is active. She marched for peace in Vietnam and

Chile. Accordingly, the war against Iraq is against all her beliefs, yet she declares the need of this war saying: "Because Saddam/Saddam was the greater enemy than, I mean,/imperialism .... we all can say/congratulations/the regime is gone/Saddam is gone" (p.20). She announces her preference to "chaos to permanent repression and cruelty."(p.19). She cannot reconcile her past with her present moment and her future, just like her inability to reconcile her love to her hate for the old regime and the American invasion. Huda states: " "I am in a period of disheartenment everywhere./Maybe I should be there./I don't know what to do with myself now, I have doubts, yeah, well/About my whole life" (p.21).

The unnamed Woman Doctor

She is a doctor who finished her study in Britain, but she chooses to return to her roots Iraq as a sense of obligation for her country and its people. Throughout the play, this doctor is "pondering with nausea the growing number of malformed babies being born in a country she fears is contaminated with uranium depletion." (p.22). She narrates her experience which is very painful for any doctor, saying six babies no head, four abnormally large heads, now today another one with two heads" (20-21).

In any war, all are losers and victims, children, women and men. In this respect Jean Bethke Elshtain(Cited in Lobasz, 2008) argues, "Wars destroy and bring into being men and women as particular identities by … giving permission to narrate. Societies are, in some sense, the sum total of their 'war stories." The doctor narrates the story of her husband case which is similar to many men in Iraq who lost part of their bodies because of the wars. "My husband he sits at home without his legs" (p.22). It is so difficult for her to live in a world subdue with death and deformity. But she has to live, for the survival instinct is very strong in Iraqis. She fully knows the consequences of radiation in Iraq, and how it is the main reason behind the different kinds of cancers and the increasing number of malformed babies. Nevertheless, she shocks her audience by her announcing that she is a pregnant, for she also might give birth to a double-headed baby.

The Teenage Girl, **Samira**

Samira is the youngest women in Nine Parts of desire, she is only nine years old. She complains that her mother does not allow her to go to the school, since the visiting of the American soldiers to her school and making the girls laugh. It seems that the mother is afraid that such laughter might make her daughter endangered for both cultures. The mother told her daughter that she is so stupid to go to the school, just to justify her fears. Only her father who disappeared after the war got used encouraging her. The little girl gives a fresh perspective to the fears and frustration of living and growing under the American occupation. In a bitter-comic moments, she expresses her fear that her mother might be also kidnapped or

disappeared. But she convinces herself that her mother will not be kidnapped because she has awful hair, "her hair is not that nice, "she says:

> [My mother] is afraid of getting stolen by gangs--now
> they steal women for money/ or to sell them./
> I try to tell momma she won't get stolen/ her hair is not that nice.
> they only steal people whos [sic] families have money.(24)

like any other child of her age, she watches different American programs and she is fascinated to the extent that she wishes to be stolen and taken to another country, "maybe I should get stolen/so I could leave my country" (p.25).

What more shocking for the audience, is, that the terrible experiences of losing her father and the afraid of losing her mother, these experiences cause trauma for any one, nevertheless, she out of boredom has learned to distinguish between the different kinds of weapons by listening to the type of shot sound. Samira's character let one think about the kind of future for this new fresh generation:

> I am not stupid/ I count bombs even
> I count between the/ hissing when it is high
> until the sound becomes low/ then two seconds--and it explodes!
> If I hear the hissing I know it's in our neighborhood
> like in a few blocks/ then I hear glass breaking for 4 seconds
> after the hit./ I can tell if it is RPG's or American,
> tank or armor vehicle,/ Kalashnikov or M16. (p.26).

Umm Ghada

Umm Ghada's painful experience is moving. She vividly portraits how she has lost her family in a bomb shelter called "Amiriyya" to an American smart bomb. Umm Ghada makes her life's mission to let the world aware of the tragic event in this shelter. The content of the spoken passages are horrifying in detail, as she is giving a tour of the shelter as it were a museum:

> This is Amiriya bomb shelter. / Here they write names /in chalk over the smoked
> Figures./ Here, on the ceiling, you can see/charred handprints and footprints
> from people who lay in the top bunks./ And here a silhouette of a woman
> vaporized from heat./ This huge room became an oven,
> and they pressed to the walls to escape from the flames.(29)

Umm Ghada, though is still alive, her real life ceased with the last night of seeing her daughter. She is frozen in her mourning, feeling guilty for her survival: "I am hard to understand/why I survive/and my children dead" (30). She ceases her life to let all people witness the horrible events, as she is retelling her story for anyone wants to listen to her. She addresses the audiences: "Now you sign the witness book/Your name will be witness, too" (31, 29)

Iraqi-American Woman

This woman might be Raffo's ego. An American young woman who "hasn't left her studio apartment in New York City for days" (35). Her family still lives in Iraq, so we see her as "transfixed in front of the TV, watching the progress of the Iraq war and caught in a frenzy of worry over relatives there." (55) She narrates:

> I watch TV/looking for faces of our family/so all I do is cry.
> I'm on my knees usually/ in the middle of my apartment
> with my mom/ we're on the phone/I'm watching/I'm holding a rosary
> watching/ CNN/ I want to pray/but I don't have/words. (36-37)

As watching the bombs come down on her family neighborhood, the American feels an alienation. Suddenly she becomes the other, the enemy, after being grown to identify herself as an American. At the same time, affected by the American lifestyle, she is shocked at her realization that one can be so easily numbing:

> a woman actually turned to me/ and said that/ she said
> "The war it's all so heartbreaking."/ She was getting a pedicure./
> I was getting a fucking pedicure (p.44).

Such trivial things like getting a pedicure while a TV blasts images of war becomes a symbol of the twentieth and the twenty-first century. The American is marked by her own growing numbness to what surrounds her. She engages herself with different activities so that not to be crazy. However, such numbing becomes burden because she can't escape her memories and the tragedy of her people in Iraq.

The American, ironically speaking, mentions the notion of trauma, describing the gap between what she sees and lives in America and the horrors of war-torn Iraq:

> Here/ there's space/we throw our arms wide amber alerts and/ seven men get trapped underground and we stop everything/we fly in engineers/to save/everything we make a movie/ we go on Oprah, we talk about it like we are moving on/ or maybe/ we can't move on/ but just one trauma we say ok/ this can change you/ possibly/ your psychology, for the rest of your life ok/ But there's no one saying-when/ their parents get/ blown apart in front of their eyes. (p.44-45)

This juxtaposition of entertainment TV programs, pedicure and the image of death and bloodshed in Iraq, is a message from Raffo to look profoundly at the other side of the cane, to be more human, to understand that in this world there is more serious things that need your attention.

The **Old Nanna** is the last of the nine women, "She wears the abaya traditionally over her head so only her face and hands remain showing. [She is] an old, old woman, scrappy and shrewd; she has seen it all" (p.45):

> I have too much existence/ I have lived through twenty-three revolutions my life has been spared-if/ my life has been spared to whom do I owe my debt? (45)

Nanna who is an old woman thinks she lives for long time, and she like others has this sense of guilt for being survival. She is living day by day, by selling whatever she got. She calmly narrates the destruction of her culture and Iraqi identity:

> I saw/ Iraqi peoples/ bringing petrol,/ Shhh/ and/ burning/
> all/ National Archives,/ Qur'anic Library/ all--
> Our history is finished./ Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd,/ Christian even, Jew--/
> if they take what we share/ it is easier/ to finish. (p.46)

Due to the chaos, Nanna sells whatever bits and pieces of Iraqi history she can find in the ruins of plundered museums and archives: books, carpets, shoes, paintings, "very old" things. (46) . Her selling may be an indication that Iraqi heritage, culture and creative works are offered for sale after the occupation. Nana also offers updated commentary on the looting and lack of stability in the new Iraq.

However, the last item she tries to sell is Layal's painting ‘Savagery.’ It is Nanna that informs us of Layla’s death:” a bomb fell on her house”. Heather Raffo in the production notes that accompanied a published version of the play, she explains that: "Nanna's selling of the painting Savagery functions then as an epilogue to remind us finally that everything we

have witnessed has a price." (47) This paint is depicting "a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. Her head was hanging bowed, and there was a golden light behind her, like a sun." (43). Raffo and her women leave the audience wonder, whose savagery has Layal depicted? Is it Saddam? Or America? Or men in general? Who is responsible for all what these women are suffering from.

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