

IRAQI WOMAN SPEAKS: AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE OF WAR IN RIVERBEND'S *BAGHDAD BURNING*

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ABSTRACT

The US-led invasion into Iraq in 2003 triggered an endless war that unleashed new cycles of violence and left the region devastated. Following the 9/11 attacks on the US soil, the West conjured up an image of Iraq as a nerve centre of terrorism. In the months preceding the invasion, the dominant narrative that revolved around the War on Terror sought to project Iraq as a nation that needed to be “liberated” and “civilised” by the West. Iraqi women were particularly (mis)represented as oppressed victims of an abusive patriarchal system, devoid of agency and freedom. Voices emerging from Iraq in the subsequent years have countered this portrayal of their country. This paper explores the myriad ways in which *Baghdad Burning* by Iraqi blogger Riverbend challenges the dominant narrative of the US-led invasion and in the process, constructs an alternative narrative as a civilian who witnessed and suffered the impact of war from close quarters. As an Iraqi, Muslim woman who speaks her mind, she subverts the gendered liberation discourse of the war and argues that women’s freedom in fact plummeted with the radicalisation of the public space enforced by Iran-inspired Shia political parties in the new US-backed post-war regime. Her account of the invasion goes beyond the usual rhetoric of statistics and policies, and offers an insight into what the occupation and the ensuing violence meant to ordinary Iraqis. In doing so, she shatters the myth of Iraq and gives an insider’s perspective of the country whose modern establishments and secular ethos were destroyed by the invasion.

Keywords: Iraq, War on Terror, 9/11, September 11, Women’s Studies, Alternative Narrative, US Invasion

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The US-led invasion into Iraq, two years after the September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center, began an endless war that sunk the region into chaos and turmoil. In the months preceding the invasion, an image of Iraq as a nerve centre of terrorism was constructed by the Bush administration, successfully framing Saddam Hussein as a threat and a key co-conspirator of the 9/11 attacks in order to manufacture public opinion in support of the war.ⁱ The dominant narrative that revolved around the War on Terror projected Iraq as a nation that needed to be “liberated” and “civilised” by the West, Iraqi Muslim women being the primary focus of this mission. In Western feminist critical discourses, Third World women in particular have been portrayed as a homogenous group victimised by an oppressive patriarchal system and governed by an inherently misogynist religion that renders women voiceless and depersonalised.ⁱⁱ As Angela Davis has argued, the version of feminism advanced by President George Bush and First Lady Laura Bush “evokes the putative status of women under Islam as a rallying call for state terrorism. In this ‘feminism,’ Islam - within the Samuel Huntington ‘Clash of Civilizations’ framework - produces the terrorist enemy of democracy and the victimized woman who has to be saved by US democracy.”ⁱⁱⁱ Voices emerging from Iraq in the subsequent years have countered this lopsided portrayal of their country and culture, and in doing so, subverted the dichotomous framework within which the war was propagated. This paper explores the myriad ways in which *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* by Iraqi blogger Riverbend offers a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant portrayal of the US-led invasion and occupation in Iraq as constructed by the West.

In the months following the US-led invasion, while the mainstream media uncritically transmitted the propaganda of war, new media like the internet and blogs afforded an alternative to ordinary civilians through which they could challenge the dominant media narrative.^{iv} Riverbend’s account of the war goes beyond the usual rhetoric of statistics and policies, and offers an insight into what the occupation and the ensuing violence mean to ordinary Iraqis. In doing so, she shatters the myth of Iraq and creates an alternative image of the country whose modern establishments and modern secular ethos were destroyed by the war. For the purpose of this article, I have considered only the first volume of the two-volume work, spanning the period August 2003 to September 2004.

Riverbend introduces herself as a 24-year-old Iraqi woman who “survived the war,” and in the war-torn country, survival is all that matters. The anonymity allows her to express her thoughts

freely. We learn that she is a computer science graduate, had stayed abroad during childhood and before the invasion, had a regular job that she loved. She is articulate on issues that matter to Iraqis, and impudent in her views about politicians who have been given the charge of running post-occupation Iraq. Her well-informed and insightful commentary on the political developments and violence happening around her is peppered with sarcasm and wit. The voice of the young Iraqi woman speaking her mind through the medium of the internet runs counter to the Western depiction of Iraqi women as suppressed beings who need to be liberated. The War on Terror was termed by the US First Lady Laura Bush as a “fight for the rights and dignity of women,” and pro-war lobbies had used images of suffering Iraqi women to justify the invasion, even though, until 2002, neither the US nor Britain cared much about the plight of the Iraqi woman under the Saddam regime.^v Riverbend’s eloquent articulation subverts this dominant discourse and evokes disbelief and suspicion among her American readers who are fed on an Orientalist narrative about Arabs, and particularly women in the Middle East, by their government, writers, experts and the media. Jenna Pitchford argues that the online medium of the blog “enabled a new level of interactivity since many readers contacted the bloggers within hours to discuss issues raised by the blog.” There is thus an instant reaction from readers, with email responses full of appreciation, but also hate, mainly from pro-war Americans. Riverbend chooses to ignore the hate mails that are full of anger and cynicism, and refuses to be silenced by critics who call her “naive” and “spoiled.” Riverbend challenges their Orientalist notions in no uncertain terms:

“Why am I not Iraqi, well because a. I have internet access (Iraqis have no internet), b. I know how to use the internet (Iraqis don’t know what computers are), and c. Iraqis don’t know how to speak English (I must be a Liberal). All that shouldn’t bother me, but it does. I see the troops in the streets and think, ‘So that’s what they thought of us before they occupied us... that may be what they think of us now.’ How is it that we are seen as another Afghanistan?”^{vi}

Her restrained reactions to hate mails show her refusal to engage with those who peddle pro-war propaganda. Instead of giving in to the attempts of cynics to silence her, she “silences” *them* by simply deleting their emails:

“ . . . keep one thing in mind – tanks and guns can break my bones, but emails can be deleted.”^{vii}

The misplaced Western notions about Iraq, as understood from responses to Riverbend’s blog, are thus two-fold: first, about the Iraqi self, portrayed as an individual who cannot speak English or use the computer, and is too “naive” to decide for herself what is best for Iraq; and second, about the larger Iraqi populace that apparently has no access to internet, has seen no development before the advent of the Americans, and therefore should not mind the midnight raids and missile strikes as they are meant to “liberate” and “civilise” the Iraqis. Riverbend counters these misconceptions and more, especially about women and life under occupation, and draws a picture of the pre-invasion Iraq that was not very different from the rest of the civilised world. For instance, in the Iraq she grew up in, Riverbend says, 50 per cent of the workforce comprised women, and they were given equal pay. People owned fast cars, had running water and electricity, and computers. Both men and women received quality education, and even though the regime was dictatorial, it was also secular and did not invade people’s private lives as long as they did not oppose Saddam. At the individual level therefore, Iraqis had a shared experience with their counterparts in the West, but all this changed after the invasion, when the US as the dominant force projected a colonial image of the Iraqi as someone in need of its benevolence.

Baghdad Burning highlights the lingering mistrust between the Iraqis and the US, which intensified as the occupation progressed. Riverbend reflects this mistrust when she ridicules the interim government as a “puppet show” controlled by the US. She voices the Iraqi aspiration of being governed by natives who understand Iraq and have experienced, or at least empathise with, the struggles that Iraqis have gone through during decades of wars and embargo. Their hopes are dashed when the “rotational government” that the US installs as an interim arrangement is based on sectarian lines rather than merit, and most of those chosen are either opportunist exiles who are detached from the ground reality, or fundamentalists representing ethno-religious groups. Riverbend refuses to believe that the interim government in any way represents the Iraqis: as she puts it, “they do not govern Iraq or Iraqis in any way – they are merely highly paid translators....” The interim government is an early example of the divisive politics, orchestrated by the US, that has governed Iraq: the composition of the government is

based on sectarian lines, with Shias taking the most number of top jobs. Riverbend is aware of the dangers of this system when she says:

“It is a way of further dividing the Iraqi population. It is adding confusion to chaos and disorder. Just the concept of an ethnically and religiously selected council to run the country is repulsive. Are people supposed to take sides according to their ethnicity or religion?”^{viii}

The violence that plagued Iraq in the subsequent months and years was however not merely a result of the sectarian nature of the government. The reasons were much more complex, massive unemployment and poor security being two of the most important. The US lost no time in disbanding the Iraqi army, rendering hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers unemployed overnight. Dexter Filkins in an article in the *New Yorker* opines:

“This (disbanding of the Iraqi army) was probably the single most catastrophic decision of the American venture in Iraq. In a stroke, the Administration helped enable the creation of the Iraqi insurgency. . . . Many of those suddenly unemployed Iraqi soldiers took up arms against the United States. We’ll never know for sure how many Iraqis would have stayed in the Iraqi Army - and stayed peaceful - had it remained intact. But the evidence is overwhelming that former Iraqi soldiers formed the foundation of the insurgency.”

Several ministries (except for oil, Riverbend notes), were shut, while the deteriorating security situation forced people to remain at home or leave Iraq. The borders were poorly guarded or unguarded altogether, resulting in massive insurgency. During times of conflict, elite actors often exploit people’s vulnerabilities by invoking their ethnic identities in order to consolidate support against rivals,^{ix} or weaponize the vulnerable by luring them with lucrative promises. As Riverbend points out, the unemployed Iraqis became easy prey for sectarian forces who paid them for kidnapping civilians or tossing a grenade, or worse, for suicide bombings. On the streets of Iraq, carjacking, looting and abductions became an easy source of money for the unemployed. Riverbend’s post titled “For Sale: Iraq” highlights how the economic reforms announced by the Finance Minister were basically about “selling” or privatising Iraq’s state industries, except for oil which was “actually being run by foreigners anyway.”^x The lofty promises of creation of jobs for Iraqis did not materialise on ground. Contracts for building

bridges and roads were awarded to American companies despite Iraqi contractors being as eligible and experienced. Riverbend herself is a victim of this employment vacuum. When, after months of violence on the streets, she returns to her office to continue her job, she is pained at the sight that meets her: the office has an eerie atmosphere with desks overturned and papers strewn everywhere. Not only is she told to go back as women are no longer allowed to work, some of her male colleagues even refuse to look at her. As a woman, it is not just joblessness that affects her: while before the invasion she went to her workplace alone, now she has to be escorted by two male family members. Far from being liberated, women in post-invasion Iraq are forced to quit their jobs and remain within the confines of their homes amidst the rapidly rising religious extremism. To Riverbend, losing her job is partly a loss of her identity: she takes pride in her work, and the financial independence that comes with it allows her a sense of freedom. Now she is forced into a condition of dependency on her male relatives, with their permission as well as company a prerequisite to step out of the home. In other words, her agency and freedom are both taken away in the US-orchestrated “democratic” Iraq.

The war’s impact on women has been manifold, affecting them culturally, socially and economically. In her September 16, 2003 post titled “Girl power and post-war Iraq,” Riverbend debunks Dr Shatha Jaffar’s claim that only Ba’athists were allowed education under the Saddam regime, and emphasises the fact that admission into colleges and universities in pre-war Iraq were based neither on one’s political affiliation nor gender. As violence and religious extremism increase, it becomes increasingly difficult for women to step out of their houses even for minor tasks like buying vegetables:

“Females can no longer leave their homes alone...it feels like we’ve gone back 50 years ever since the beginning of the occupation. A woman, or girl, out alone, risks anything from insults to abduction. An outing has to be arranged at least an hour beforehand...Two males have to be procured (preferably large) and ‘safety arrangements’ must be made in this total state of lawlessness.”^{xi}

Riverbend loves her freedom and is aghast at the possibility of secular family law being replaced by the fundamentalist version of the Shariah law which would impose restrictions on Iraqi women. She educates her readers on the Islamic way of dressing for women, elaborating on the difference between hijab, abaya and the veil, while emphasising that none of these are

oppressive, but their forced imposition is. She herself does not wear hijab, but perceives it as a symbol of woman's freedom of choice rather than a symbol of oppression. The rising extremism makes life difficult especially for educated women, who are forced to stay home despite being capable of contributing to the reconstruction of Iraq. Women like Henna Aziz, an electrical engineer, Akila Al-Hashimi, a council member, who dared to defy the fundamentalists, are murdered. Sinno notes that by telling their stories, and stories of ordinary women who suffer under the occupation, Riverbend "challenges the dominant discourse's narrative on 'women's liberation,' 'democracy,' and 'regime change,' which many officials had also been claiming as justifiable reasons for waging war," and "invalidates the liberation narrative normally associated with military presences."^{xii}

Sinno observes that "Riverbend's deconstruction of war rhetoric is manifested through her relentless challenging of the different binary oppositions often characteristic of war discourse, as articulated by US government officials and the mainstream media." This she does by inverting the meanings of two words that formed the basis of war rhetoric – "terrorism/terrorists" and "liberation." In several posts, Riverbend documents the irresponsible killings of children during midnight raids or shelling by American troops, persecution of educated men and women, and deaths of innocent women and children in attacks, all of whom are misleadingly clustered together in the mainstream media as "insurgents" or "terrorists." She inverts the meaning of terrorism when she entitles a post on a midnight raid by American troops in her neighbourhood as "Terrorists." The terror here is inflicted by the troops who swoop down on a family of an 80-year-old man, who is taken away for no apparent reason and whose family is humiliated in public.

In a post on March 20, 2004, exactly a year after American troops first entered Iraq, Riverbend says on the lessons learned in the first year of the occupation:

"We've learned that terrorism isn't actually the act of creating terror. It isn't the act of killing innocent people and frightening others...no, you see, that's called a 'liberation'...the war on terror is a joke...Iraq is proof of that everyday" (Riverbend, 2005).

She recalls the bombings that left her in tears, not because she was afraid, but because she was saddened at the sight of Baghdad being reduced to a rubble:

“With every explosion, I knew that some vital part of [Baghdad] was going up in flames. It was terrible....That was the beginning of the ‘liberation’... a liberation from sovereignty, a certain sort of peace, a certain measure of dignity. We’ve been liberated from our jobs, and our streets and the sanctity of our homes... some of us have been liberated from the memories of our family and friends.”^{xiii}

In Riverbend’s narrative, “terrorism” and “liberation” are no more antonyms as “‘terrorist’ starts to signify and literally include ‘innocent’ or ‘victim.’”^{xiv} These two words thus come semantically closer with the blurring of the difference in their impact on people. By inverting what or who these words signify, Riverbend is thus subverting the dominant discourse.

As already stated, Riverbend’s account of the war is much more than mere statistics and political commentary. By narrating the daily ordeals of her life and of those around her, she provides a deep insight into what it means to wake up every day to the sound of bombs and missile strikes. War is fought not only on the streets and empty lands, but within the homes, as Iraqis constantly struggle with water scarcity and electricity outage amid unbearable weather conditions. It is about spending sleepless nights and living under the constant threat of one’s house being bombarded or raided next. It is about keeping documents ready at hand and coming up with ways to conceal trinkets of gold jewellery from raiding troops. It is about uttering a prayer of gratitude when water finally runs in the taps, and spending hours together in long queues for a litre of fuel. It is about living in anxiety for days as a close relative is kidnapped by a gang for ransom. Riverbend poignantly describes the effort it takes to do simple tasks, such as just getting out of bed:

“How is it possible to wake up tired? It feels like I’ve been struggling in my sleep... struggling with nightmares, struggling with fears... struggling to listen for gunshots or tanks... It’s not the sort of ‘tired’ where I want to sleep – it’s the sort of tired where I just want to completely shut down... put myself on standby, if you will. I think everyone feels that way lately... We’re living, this moment, the future we were afraid to contemplate 6 months ago. It’s like trying to find your way out of a nightmare.”^{xv}

By speaking of the occupation on such a personal, domestic level, Riverbend is blurring the boundaries of war as being traditionally fought only in the public sphere against targeted enemies. She provides an “insider’s war narrative that opposes the myth of war in its clear-cut

categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’ and which emphasizes everybody’s involvement in the victimization, resistance, and survival process.”^{xvi}

Another notion that Riverbend seeks to dispel is the equation between being anti-American and anti-occupation. Jenna Pitchford notes that the concept of “anti-Americanism” is difficult to define, with commentators differing widely over what the term signifies. She argues that those who conflate anti-Americanism with “envy” or “resentment” of the “moral order” of America, or its wealth and freedom, base their opinion on the concept of US exceptionalism: “the notion that America is not only unique, but in some way exemplary.” This notion received all the more importance in the aftermath of 9/11, when protecting the US interests was seen as synonymous with making the world a safer place by getting “rid of evil.” However, more balanced views, like that of Max Friedman make a “clear distinction between demonstrating objection to American foreign policy and taking an ‘anti-American’ stance,”^{xvii} and it is on this idea that Iraqi responses to American occupation are based. Riverbend makes this clear when she asserts:

“I don’t hate Americans, contrary to what many people seem to believe. Not because I love Americans, but simply because I don’t hate Americans, like I don’t hate the French, Canadians, Brits, Saudis, Jordanians, Micronesians, etc. It’s that simple.”^{xviii}

In another post, countering an American military spokesman’s claim that there was a spread of “anti-Americanism” via the media, Riverbend makes a passionate statement about the distinction between rejecting American society and rejection of American foreign policy:

“. . . when I hear the talk about ‘anti-Americanism’ it angers me. Why does America identify itself with its military and government? Why does being anti-Bush and anti-occupation have to mean that a person is anti-American? We watch American movies, listen to everything from Britney Spears to Nirvana and refer to every single brown, fizzy drink as ‘Pepsi.’ I hate American foreign policy and its constant meddling in the region... I hate American tanks in Baghdad and American soldiers in our streets... Why does that mean that I hate America and Americans? Are tanks, troops and violence the only face of America? If the Pentagon, Department of Defense and Condi are ‘America,’ then yes – I hate America.”^{xix}

Riverbend's assertion of Iraqi familiarity with American culture and society is in itself a proof against any attempt to homogenize Iraqis as a populace far removed from the West. Riverbend depicts Iraqis as being respectful of other cultures as long as those cultures are not imposed on them. Nevertheless, it does not translate into welcoming foreign occupation. After the Abu Ghraib scandal, especially, the Iraqi attitude towards American troops changed dramatically, and even Riverbend herself, who had previously empathised with them, feels anger and resentment at the insult to Iraqi pride.

Riverbend's staunch objection to American foreign policy and military presence goes beyond just a passionate assertion. Time and again, she dismisses the narrative about the progress of the war constructed by the US government, its officials and the media, and offers a new perspective into how things are viewed by Iraqis. One instance of this pertains to the discourse around Iraqi National Day. April 9, the day American troops entered Baghdad and pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein, was declared by Iraqi Governing Council as Iraq's "National Day" in celebration of the fall of dictatorship. However, to ordinary civilians like Riverbend, the day meant fear and anxiety as fighter planes and heavy tanks accompanied by explosions and shelling entered Iraq's streets. Riverbend refuses to recognise it as a day of celebration, instead calling it "occupation day," and counters the dominant media discourse spun around the celebrations on the streets of Baghdad as Saddam's statue fell but ignored the other, bleaker side:

"Whether you loved Saddam or hated him, Baghdad tore you to pieces. Baghdad was burning. April 9 is the Occupation Day. I can understand why Bush was celebrating – I can't understand how anyone who values independence would celebrate it."^{xx}

Tabish Khair speaks of the gap in the narrative weaved by the US media that broadcast images of "thousands of Iraqis" celebrating the fall of Saddam. When the image is frozen, another dimension arises:

"What remains on the (television) screen is at best a handful of people – a couple of hundred perhaps – a completely insignificant crowd in a place like Iraq. There are huge gaps between the demonstrators... if one notices these gaps, one can read the TV image in a different way. One can see the other side of the story, so to say, the 'other dimension': but one cannot go beyond that."^{xxi}

Riverbend's narrative provides a glimpse into this 'other dimension' when she speaks of the day as one filled with fear and nervous anticipation:

“It was a day of shocked, horrified relatives, with dilapidated pupils and trembling lips, dragging duffel bags, spouses and terrified children needing shelter. All of us needed comfort that no one could give... it was a day of charred bodies and blackened vehicles.”^{xxii}

A year later, when her memory of the day is clearer, she describes it as a day of empty streets, blocked roads and non-stop explosions in which families lost their loved ones. She says:

“... they lost loved ones on April 9... to guns and tanks and Apaches... and the current Governing Council want us to remember April 9 fondly and hail it our 'National Day'... a day of victory... but whose victory? And whose nation?”^{xxiii}

To conclude, Riverbend's narrative is in stark contrast to the one propagated by the mainstream media and the Western governments. By providing her, or Iraqi, side of the story, Riverbend not just challenges the dominant discourse, but creates a whole new one that offers a completely different perspective into the War on Terror, or “Operation Iraqi Freedom” as it was called. Riverbend's incisive commentary on the war transcends the feminine space of domesticity and glides into the masculine realm of politics and economics, thus subverting the Orientalist notion of the suppressed, ignorant Arab woman. Not only does this Iraqi woman speak, she mocks the invaders with impunity and challenges the media discourse with the lived reality of war. In doing so, Riverbend resists all attempts to project the war as a Western humanitarian mission, while at the same time rejecting and inverting the liberation narrative.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Amy Gershkoff & Shana Kushner, *Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric*, 3 Perspectives on Politics, 525-537 (2005).
- ⁱⁱ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity 17-42 (Duke University Press 2003).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Angela Davis, *A vocabulary for feminist praxis: on war and radical critique*, Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism (Robin L. Riley et al. ed., Zed Books 2008).
- ^{iv} Nadine Sinno, *Deconstructing the myth of liberation @ riverbendblog.com*, Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism (Robin L. Riley et al. ed., Zed Books 2008).
- ^v HAIFA ZANGANA, CITY OF WIDOWS: AN IRAQI WOMAN'S ACCOUNT OF WAR AND RESISTANCE 93 (Seven Stories Press 2009).
- ^{vi} 1 RIVERBEND, BAGHDAD BURNING: GIRL BLOG FROM IRAQ 6 (Feminist Press 2005).
- ^{vii} Id. at 10.
- ^{viii} Id. at 25.
- ^{ix} JOLLE DEMMERS, THEORIES OF VIOLENT CONFLICT: AN INTRODUCTION (2nd ed., Routledge 2017).
- ^x *Supra* vi, at 77.
- ^{xi} *Supra* vi, at 16.
- ^{xii} *Supra* iv, at 139.
- ^{xiii} *Supra* vi, at 227.
- ^{xiv} *Supra* iv, at 228.
- ^{xv} *Supra* vi, at 8.
- ^{xvi} *Supra* iv, at 133-134.
- ^{xvii} Jenna Pitchford, *The 'Global War on Terror,' Identity, and Changing Perceptions : Iraqi Responses to America's War in Iraq*, Journal of American Studies, 45(4), 695-716, (2011), JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41427295>.
- ^{xviii} *Supra* vi, at 13.
- ^{xix} *Supra* vi, at 255.
- ^{xx} *Supra* vi, at 29.
- ^{xxi} Tabish Khair, *The Death of the Reader*, Muslim Modernities: Tabish Khair's Essays on Moderation and Mayhem (Renu Kaul Verma ed., Vitasta Publishing 2008).
- ^{xxii} *Supra* vi, at 29.
- ^{xxiii} *Supra* vi, at 249.

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