

# Honour and Reputation as Gender Politics in Ali Abdel-Nabi Al Zaidi's *Rubbish* (1995) and Amir Al-Azraki's *The Widow* (2014)

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*The two related notions of honour and reputation are closely associated with the social status of individuals (male or female), particularly in a society governed by traditional, patriarchal moral values. However, writing about honour and reputation in Iraq (and in the Middle East in general) means talking about women's chastity and their sexual morality specifically. Eclipsing honour and societal reputation to women's bodies are deep-rooted patriarchal norms that stigmatize women's involvement in sexual relations (mainly outside marriage codes) and exclude men from this adultery framework. The current paper investigates the concepts of honour, chastity and reputation in relation to gender norms in Iraq through two contemporary Iraqi plays. First, the article introduces the two concepts through the social, traditional and religious context in the Middle East, focusing on Iraq. The discussion in the second section moves to tackle Ali Al Zaidi's play *Rubbish* (1995), while the third section deals with Amir Al-Azraki's *The Widow* (2014). In these two sections the study looks critically at how the two plays dramatize the concepts of honour and chastity through their characters. Being written respectively during and after wars, the two plays are seen as reactions to such issues. Hence they represent the new complex visions of two male perspectives challenging dramatically and shaking the settlement of such notions of morals and their impact on women as well as on society.*

In the Middle East, particularly in Iraqi culture, honour and reputation represent pivotal issues in society, in that they are governed by traditional moral values. Interestingly, it is a gendered phenomenon for Iraqi people, since it has always been equated with women's chastity and the violation of family reputation. Therefore the social norm is to maintain honour and social status; the moral code of the family has to be protected. Hence the choice of the two plays in the context of the current study, since both plays, Ali Al Zaidi's *Rubbish* (1995) and Amir Al-Azraki's *The Widow* (2014), portray the social constructions of notions of honour and reputation via their main female characters, Afaf and Nour respectively. When the former, Afaf, finds a new unique definition for honour and reputation that may respond to their basic needs of survival, the latter, Nour, tries to challenge the social norm of a widow as being a 'second-hand woman' and defends her right to love and be loved. Unlike other female characters who represent the honour figures of their society, bearing the burden of maintaining that

honour by retaining a highly acceptable reputation, Afaf and Nour in both plays dispute those norms instead of subjecting themselves to them.

In order to develop a better understanding of honour and its prominent role in a particular cultural milieu like Iraq, the two key terms of the title, honour and reputation, need to be clarified. Starting from an Arabic context, Arab traditional comprehensive dictionaries dedicate whole pages to explaining each term. Going back to the earliest Arab dictionaries, both *Tahtheeb Al Lughah* (Refining Language) by Mohammad ibn Ahmed Al Hurowi Al Azhari (895–981 DC/282–370 H) and *Lisan Al Arab* (The Tongue of Arabs) by Ibn Mandhour (1232–1311 DC/630–711 H), dedicated pages to elaborating on the exact meaning of the term ‘honour’, pointing out that ‘honour’ is the pure race of an individual, indicating his/her high social status and superiority. Moreover, Al Azhari adds that the highest point on the back of a camel’s hump is called its honour.<sup>1</sup> *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary* (1755), in the eighteenth century, however, presents a mirrored definition in the Western world of the term ‘honour’, which may bring the two worlds closer to each other. Johnson’s dictionary states that the term ‘honour’ is of external and internal meanings. Externally, Johnson defines honour as ‘reputation or fame’. Internally, it is indicative of a ‘nobleness of mind’.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the latest online *Oxford English Dictionary* clarifies that ‘honour’ is ‘Great respect, esteem, or reverence received, gained, or enjoyed by a person or thing; glory, renown, fame; reputation, good name.’<sup>3</sup> This definition of the twenty-first century inevitably take us to the second term of this study, ‘reputation’. Ibn Mandhour’s dictionary explains the term ‘reputation’, or *sumah* – the word is pronounced in Arabic through its root as a derivation of the verb ‘hear’ (*sameah*). And reputation or *sumah* in Arabic is to hear of something or about something or somebody – generally the connotation here is negative.<sup>4</sup> Sana Al Khayyat’s book *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq* (2001) clarifies that there are two words to explain ‘honour’ in Arabic. These are ‘Sharaf which means honor [*sic*] in the wider sense, and the other is “ird” which is directly related to sexual conduct and chastity’.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these definitions of honour and reputation lead to the vital term ‘chastity’, since both Arabic and English dictionaries agree on the notion that honour and reputation have to do with the individual’s conduct and with what is heard of them, which may raise them to a higher status socially or weigh them down. Al Azhari’s *Tahtheeb Al lughah* defines ‘chastity’ or *ifah* as the individual’s ability to stop themselves from doing wrong things. The dictionary continues to clarify that chastity is the practice of forbidding oneself from doing in secret what one is ashamed of doing in public.<sup>6</sup> The original definition of the term does not differentiate between men and women in this. However, in the Middle East, it is common knowledge and culturally understood that chastity is more observed among women than among men. Hence it is the general norm among Arabic men that ‘their women’, i.e. their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters, and in some cases even their cousins, are their honour, and ‘keeping them chaste’ would be to maintain their honour and reputation. This may mean watching over their behaviour and putting them in good marriages when they are of age, and may also include imposing certain restrictions on them that women are to observe and live by. In Johnson’s dictionary, this chastity is clearly

demonstrated as ‘a form of honour [which] was reserved solely for women’.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, chastity can be seen as, first, ‘purity of the body’, and second, ‘freedom from obscenity’.<sup>8</sup> In its usage, honour means ‘honesty, fairness, or integrity in one’s beliefs and actions’. ‘Reputation’, on the other hand, is a relational concept: ‘the estimation in which a person or thing is held, especially by the community or the public generally’.<sup>9</sup> Such an understanding of women’s chastity largely matches the Arabic, particularly Iraqi, understanding of women’s chastity and honour.

Nadje Al Ali’s *Iraqi Women* discusses the status of Iraqi women throughout the second half of the twentieth century up to the present time, revealing much about women’s conditions via comprehensive research and interviews with Iraqi women. Al Ali’s book states clearly,

A woman’s proper conduct and behaviour, especially in terms of her body and sexuality, affirms not only her own honour but that of her family, especially her male relatives. In other words, if a woman deviates from socially and culturally acceptable behaviour or norms, it is not only her reputation but that of her father, husband, brother or son that are at stake. What constitutes proper behaviour and conduct has varied according to social class, family background, place of origin and residence, relationship to religion, as well as political orientation.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the centrality of sexual restraint to a woman’s reputation is of importance in maintaining family honour. An honourable woman is chaste and modest as long as she avoids ‘sexual sin’. Sexual misconduct not only dishonours her but also ‘shamed her family, especially her husband and father’.<sup>11</sup> As a result, when a woman appears to be ‘unchaste’, she not only loses her honour in the eyes of her community but also loses her credibility. Unlike the construct of masculine virtues, such as courage, feminine chastity was thought to be somehow essential to her nature; once lost, it would be difficult to recover or to restore. Though sexual temperament is natural and innate in both men and women, women are held accountable if it is violated outside marriage norms. As Laura Gowing argues, a woman’s honour is not her own, but is closely tied to the honour of her whole family.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, for an Arabic woman, chastity constitutes her credit and reputation. It is a prerequisite for her, rather than a measure of reputation. The violation of her chastity makes her abhorred and despised by her society.

Unlike men, in the Middle East women are always subject to criticism, even to the extent of their choice of clothes. As Rachel Bailey Jones and Shawgi Tell affirm, ‘In many ways, the onus of sexual purity and chastity is placed on women, from restrictions on dress to a ban on women driving. Men are given much more leeway in terms of their movement and actions.’<sup>13</sup> With regard to such concern, ‘honour and reputation are highly gendered concepts, different for men and for women’.<sup>14</sup> This view is motivated mainly by norms and traditions rather than by religious standards of sexual conduct. Religiously, speaking in Islam, the act of sexuality is forbidden outside the marriage bond. This fact makes it difficult for both men and women to exceed their limits. Such Islamic teaching may not be a fact of Islam alone, as it may somewhat paradoxically be aligned to Christian conservative values. Significantly, Bruce Malina,

an American biblical scholar, developed an efficient model to determine honour and shame, according to which, Malina claimed,

concerns of honour and shame are to be found where authority, gender status, and respect intersect. *Authority* is the ability to control others without force; *gender status* refers to the different standards of acceptable behaviour that apply to males and females; *respect* refers to the attitude one ought to have toward those who control your existence (humans, gods, God).<sup>15</sup>

Where these three intersect, Malina situates his definition of honour: 'the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) plus that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group'.<sup>16</sup> Honour, for Malina, is tested by the public court of reputation in the eyes of the entire society. Accordingly, we have two types of honour: 'ascribed honour' and 'acquired honour'.<sup>17</sup> Ascribed honour is the honour with which one is born. It is governed by ethnicity, family reputation, gender, wealth and so on. This is the concept of honour as understood in the Middle East, especially in Islamic societies; that is, amongst those people who believe that honour is something precious that cannot be bargained for. They are ready to die rather than live in shame. On the other hand, acquired honour is the one that can be won and lost on a daily basis through one's personal conduct. It is not governed by religious or traditional values.

Undoubtedly, economic and social circumstances may leave a large impact on women's social behaviour. Difficult circumstances sometimes push women to act against their desires. Soile Ylivuori points out that women's honour is also heavily affected by their social and economic status.<sup>18</sup> Poverty or adverse situations may lead women to commit 'sexual sin' in order to live.

Furthermore, to understand honour and reputation in Iraqi society, it is important to pay closer attention to the interaction between those norms of reputation based on social status and those derived from ideas about personal conduct. In a groundbreaking book chapter on 'Peacebuilding: The Performance and Politics of Trauma in Northern Iraq', Sarah Keeler prescribes the victimization of women according to their different social roles; this is a binary opposition, such as the relationship between 'perpetrator'/'victim' and 'male'/'female'. She further points out that 'gendered readings of Iraqi society in the run-up to and since the 2003 invasion often cast Iraqi women as perpetual victims, not of foreign occupiers, but of Iraqi men and their patriarchal societal norms'.<sup>19</sup> Wars obviously throw their shadow on the domestic household of the family, eventually creating some sort of duality in the Iraqi personality, affecting largely male behaviour with the 'other'. In this context, women are still constructed and treated as almost a second race in such a patriarchal hierarchy. The presumption is that in times of war, men have to take the lead. Women only exist for child rearing. When peace is regained, men rarely help their wives. Mostly they are troublemakers. In such an environment, women have to bear man's ill behaviour to avoid divorce.<sup>20</sup> Hence crimes related to honour are rife in Iraq, especially after the US invasion.

Many factors accelerated the appearance of this phenomenon, among the most apparent of them are poverty, the Western influence of women's rights, and the rise of social media, which was forbidden prior to 2003. The UN (ICESCR) report states the increasing rate of honour-killing crimes in Iraq as it investigates the situation of women's human rights violations in Iraq since 2003.<sup>21</sup> Shahrzad Mojab's article "Post-war Reconstruction", Imperialism and Kurdish Women's NGOs' points out that '14 per cent of women face violence on a daily basis; and 7 per cent of women have been threatened with "honour" killing, the majority of which (64 per cent) come from family members'.<sup>22</sup> In an essay about honour, shame and violence against young Muslim women, entitled 'Seductions of the Honour Crime', Lila Abu-Lughod describes the reasons behind violence against women as 'the violence of poverty, migration, state secularism, Western cultural dominance, racism, and other aspects that are ignored when Muslim women's victimhood is blamed solely on Muslim men, the Muslim community, Islamic texts, and Muslim culture'.<sup>23</sup> Taking this into consideration, Iraqi women were victims of embodied suffering, which brings the profound and psychic trauma of years of exposure to violence, war, and oppression into their daily lived realities. Accordingly, Iraqi women are torn between the adverse circumstances of social life and the discourse of gender, which gives men privilege over women. To quote Sarah Keeler again, 'Iraqi women are a deviant form of protest against both the quotidian daily realities of oppression, surveillance, and threats of violence under which women in Iraq live, and of the grand narratives of gender and ethnic identity and state building with which they interact'.<sup>24</sup> Iraqi males' violence against women is caused by different cultural and social norms. Take, for example, the traditional view that men have the right to control or discipline women, which makes women vulnerable to hard-hearted partners. Within a patriarchal structure, male control over women's lives, bodies and sexuality is strengthened by 'culturalization'; that is, cultural norms and values. Here, man is the master of the situation. He plans, implements and ignores women's needs when he desires. As such, women are marginalized. This male dominance can be seen in rural areas where strict traditions form the frameworks of the relevant societies.

However, this issue varies in nature according to cultural values that may play a role, creating factors that contribute to formulating female status in her society which may differ from one culture to another. As Kouta *et al.* indicate for the European context,

in various European countries, cultural factors contribute to instances of femicide. It is therefore crucial to analyse how each country addresses aspects such as, for example, masculinity and femininity, gender equality, domestic violence and femicide laws, patriarchal ideology, traditional values, the role of religion in society, culturally specific forms of femicide, and media coverage of femicide and violence against women. Although patriarchy remains dominant in European societies, each European country has its own specific context in which the factors identified above interact. These differences should be taken into account in order both to explain and to prevent incidences of violence against women, including femicide, because it is impossible to understand femicide without considering the particular cultural environment in which it occurs.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Iraqi women, however, the killing of women to 'save the family honour' is a tragic occurrence and a true reflection of culturally accepted discrimination against women and girls. Sometimes this act is encouraged by other family members.

Despite their sensitivity and complex cultural implications, theatre practitioners and playwrights did not turn a blind eye to these issues. Conversely, they tried hard to tackle these vital notions, which they were forbidden to talk about freely prior to 2003, due to the Ba'ath regime's close censorship, as well as the cultural tradition of avoiding what may lead to discomfort for the community. Both plays discussed here represent a challenge on their own. Al Zaidi's play *Rubbish* represents the risk that Al Zaidi insisted on taking in the 1990s to express the suffering of his generation and time. Al Zaidi (1965–) is originally a schoolteacher from Al Nasiriyah – a city in the south of Iraq. He is one of the theatre voices who was highly concerned with revealing the reality of the difficult life Iraqis lived during the 1990s due to the impact of previous and ongoing wars and the economic sanctions that drained Iraqi life of its riches. On the other hand, Al-Azraki's play *The Widow* portrays an unspoken, yet very obvious, matter of women's exploitation in the new post-2003 Iraq. Unlike Al Zaidi, Al-Azraki is of a younger generation from Basra – one of the big cities in the far south of Iraq. He witnessed the suffering of the 1990s as a teenager and grew up to be a college professor who had the chance to leave Iraq after 2003 and settled in Canada. In Iraq, several female writers tried their hands at writing plays, among the most prominent of them are Dr Awatif Naem, who is a playwright, director and actor, and Rasha Fadhil, who is a playwright only. Of course there are other female names who are connected with dramatic works, mainly as prominent actors, such as Dr Shatha Salime, Awatif Al Salman, Dr Suha Salim and others. Being connected with theatre and the dramatic profession, such as being an actor, in Iraqi society is a challenge by itself. This is due to the fact that a woman who is attached to such an environment must prove, show or express her 'chastity' at all times, particularly as most of the female theatre-makers are connected, in the prejudicial eyes of the wide public, to dancers with questionable reputations.

We argue that these two plays, written by male playwrights yet critical of the patriarchal set-up, emerge as a new form of patriarchal guardianship. These plays add a unique layer of critical masculinity in the new era, since they address issues of women's segregation and suffering. Accordingly, their representations of female suffering may serve as a mirror to Iraqi society, where men own the power and the authority, as well as the voice, to speak of the unspeakable for women, which may not only be acceptable, but rather more comprehensible, since society would rather listen to them, being men, than to women. They also show the level of male awareness and understanding of the discrimination and hardship that women go through. In a Middle Eastern society like Iraq, those two playwrights – being good observers – have developed a close understanding of the situation of women which renders a clearer dramatic vision. As men, they would be listened to and heard when speaking on behalf of women in the society, more widely than if women spoke in their own voice. Women's voices have been too easily dismissed as repetitive and monotonous in always complaining about their situation – not taken as a social critique, but through

a gendered lens as mere whining. Moreover, addressing women's issues proved fertile dramatic ground where the two male writers could cultivate arguments on behalf of women that the wider public might begin to take seriously.

### ***Rubbish* (1995): chastity redefined by war**

During the 1990s, the Ba'ath regime imposed stronger censorship over cultural activities, particularly dramatic productions to avoid revealing the realities that Iraqi people lived and suffered. In an article entitled 'Iraqi Theatre: A Niche in an Ecologically Political Sane Milie', Midhin and Hussein wrote,

looking back to Iraqi theatre prior to 2003, we see that it was bound to political themes that espoused the ruling political party. Though Iraq became a slightly more open society after the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein was deposed, theatrical producers dared not challenge the regime while it was in power.<sup>26</sup>

With the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the US, the situation inside the country created a multilayered environment that fertilized the dramatic mind for rich symbolic plays that tried to expose the hidden lives of Iraqis artistically. Prior to 2003, Iraqi people suffered much due to those economic sanctions, leading to poverty and poor health conditions. That suffering was doubled by the cruel regime that never allowed any expression of such suffering, let alone asking for women's voices to express their pain. To avoid being censored, Iraqi playwrights instead used symbols and suggestive language. However, Al Zaidi's *Rubbish* is one of the dramatic inventions that draws attention to the reality of Iraqis during the 1990s. It was first written in 1995, and participated in a theatre festival for playwrights in the same year, winning the prestigious Yousif Al Ani prize for the best playtext of the year. Yet it remained a reading text without an actual performance, due to the fear that it might be censored or its playwright may face the brutality of the Ba'ath regime. Al Zaidi confirms that it was only after about eighteen years that the play found its way to performance in Basra and Nasiriyah in Iraq in 2013, a matter that gave the play a magnified impact as its audience first believed that it was written to show the Iraqi situation after 2003.<sup>27</sup>

In his play, Al Zaidi intentionally reverses the matter of gender politics, giving a new role to the female character, far away from the dominance of men. Yet the price to be paid is the loss of honour. *Rubbish* portrays a physically and spiritually polluted atmosphere, where we see that the violation of honour and chastity is highly associated with poverty. The play's plot centres around three main characters: a prisoner of war who is depicted in a wheelchair named Sherif (meaning honourable); his wife, Afaf (meaning chastity); and his mother. Clearly, the character names are particularly significant as they reveal the major motifs of the play, honour and chastity, which are represented by the two main characters respectively: Sherif and Afaf. The names render the symbolic retreat of the norms and values in the Iraqi society in the 1990s, since none of the characters maintains the reference of their names socially. Upon Sherif's return to his home, he discovers that his house has been transformed into a brothel. The house, among other things, becomes a space by

which Al Zaidi tells the sad stories of war. The inhabitants of this house are impotent spiritually and physically. Sherif is shocked when he discovers that not only material values have changed but also traditional ones. His speech about honour and chastity seems alien to the members of the house. These values no longer exist in the world of war, violence and poverty. Therefore he is not received well by his mother and wife. Instead, he is dismissed from the house to find himself toward the end of the play in a rubbish sack. The compromise between Sherif and his mother and wife is achieved after he admits that he lost his manhood. At the end, he accepts the vile work in his own usurped house to go on living.

Al Zaidi opens his play by drawing the attention to the customers, who come and go from the house in an ongoing movement. All the customers are cripples who are thrown into a house that is like a rubbish bin. Here, everything is sold and bought, even honour, which has become a commodity. From the very beginning of the play, the mother announces her 'conditions' to all those who want to enter her house, her customers:

CUSTOMER: I ... I ... I am ...

MOTHER: (*firmly*) We don't have time for you ... kick him out of here.

CUSTOMER: I have the same right as the rest of them!

MOTHER: You want to break the law in this place with your belated manhood, you and your, (*Sarcastically*) 'I am'!

CUSTOMER: I used to be one of the super heroes who had super manhood.

MOTHER: You have to repent and renounce your old manhood and leave silently. This place receives the leftovers of men, only.

CUSTOMER: Be reassured. I am a leftover too.

MOTHER: (*sarcastically*) What a touching scene

CUSTOMER: I am a leftover ... Believe me.

MOTHER: A leftover! OK then ... You can be one of the leftovers of this house. Hey, you men, write down his name in the list ...<sup>28</sup>

The argument about honour and reputation starts with the appearance of Sherif, who is taken as a new customer. When he comes into his old house, he is not recognized by his mother and wife. Sherif is therefore received and interrogated by his mother about his name, which seems unfamiliar to the mother in this new environment. And when he introduces himself as Sherif, this fact is reinforced by Afaf, who warns Sherif not to repeat this word – referring to the meaning of his name – here: 'You are not allowed to repeat this word here again. Beware! They'll kill you. This is a forbidden word. It can cause all our death, even the other houses around us, the houses beside them, and the ones beside those ...'<sup>29</sup> The words 'honour' and 'chastity' are a source of threat to



both the mother and Afaf, who do not want anything to hinder or halt their work in prostitution.

The exchange of accusations between Sherif and the other members of the household over the responsibility of the present state of the family is heightened. Sherif accuses his mother and wife of ignoring his sacrifice. He not only lost his legs and hands but was also deserted by his wife and mother. What Sherif lost cannot be compared to that of Afaf. Afaf lost her chastity and honour. She says, 'Whatever they deprived you of is much less and easier to deal with than what they deprived us of.'<sup>30</sup> Here, Afaf's notion of her loss can be understood in light of the theme of Malina's 'ascribed honour' stated in the introduction. Moreover, the mother thinks that Sherif's wars are absurd. For her, Sherif has been exploited by the ruling political party to achieve its own political agenda. Because of this, Sherif's mother and wife are left at the mercy of those who might exploit their position. Their terrible circumstances forced them to embrace prostitution in order to confront poverty and death. When Afaf is reproachingly questioned by her husband about what happened to them and why they have changed, she nostalgically questions Sherif back: 'What happened to all the beautiful, wonderful, pure and innocent women in our street, do you remember them? They used to be like angels who knew one road only, you know! Now they have walked all kinds of roads.'<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the mother cries, 'What happened to all good mothers in our street, who could never walk without abayas. Do you remember them, they became without abayas and no clothes too.'<sup>32</sup> An abaya is traditional attire that Iraqi women wear over their heads to cover up their clothes.<sup>33</sup> The abaya here represents women's honour as it shows them to be chaste and modest. Sherif's shock is clearly manifested in the following lines, which reveal the massive contrast between the past and the present with regard to honour. Sherif astonishingly assures them,

Yes, the houses are all open now, how can you explain this? Someone with a thick long moustache calls with difficult-to-understand words. One of them was, Oh God, I knew her very well, she walked out half naked. She used to be an honourable woman. Our next door wife walked out too, but almost naked. Strange faces, I haven't seen before. I thought our street had turned into a market, maybe!<sup>34</sup>

In the above lines, Sherif describes his town, which has turned into a polluted environment, a whorehouse. Everything is permissible here. The lack of honour allows the pimp or panderer with 'a thick and long moustache' to invite people to choose women for sexual entertainment. Culturally, in Arab countries, leaving the main doors open is shameful. The city becomes a special market where sex is bought and sold. This is a 'market of soft and white flesh',<sup>35</sup> as the mother states. Al Zaidi here uses clear exaggeration to emphasize the extent of suffering the country has reached.

Sherif's puzzlement increases when he is told by Afaf and his mother that their house is an indispensable part of this market. Shocked, he reacts, 'My home? My room, here? How can I stand on my feet when silence has swallowed me? (*Screams*) Who am I? Who? Who? Who?'<sup>36</sup> Being the man of the house, Sherif thinks that he owns the house and the members of the house. Therefore losing honour for him equals losing his identity. As a Middle Eastern and Iraqi man, Sherif assumes that he

has some kind of authority in his own house, therefore he asks his mother to dismiss Afaf, the source of 'sin': 'Let's live together, you and me. Let's throw away this fallen woman and clean this house of the dirt that is growing in it.'<sup>37</sup> The mother seems indifferent to what Sherif says: 'Leave aside these words from your war. Your wife is the source of our living. We eat out of her work. Can you provide some other source instead of her?'<sup>38</sup> The mother and Sherif get into a heated argument over the nature of the sin, for the two women have gained a different understanding of sin and virtue. While Sherif accuses them of adultery, the mother looks at sin as a virtue. The mother shouts, 'Please, call it surviving. When vice is the cause of our survival then it should be called virtue.'<sup>39</sup> For Sherif, the sin is 'the line between being a beautiful creature and the ugliest creature in this world'.<sup>40</sup> Here, Sherif talks about the sin committed by these women, while the women see sin as an honour as long as it protects the family from death, poverty and hunger. The mother states, 'Vice ... is when a person is the cause of the destruction of another person. This is what vice means. We are practicing our honour in our own honourable way.'<sup>41</sup> The mother justifies her reaction to the adverse circumstances they went through after the absence of Sherif. She bitterly recounts,

What were you waiting for during all this time of absence? A house with no man, with no walls, two women in an everlasting night, alone, depressed. In our kitchen we hid hunger. In your white wedding room, there was unbeatable frost. A wife who was burning every second. What were you waiting for?<sup>42</sup>

Sherif seems dissatisfied with his mother's justification. She reassures him saying, '[we waited] for you! We sold everything in this house, except for one bed that we used afterwards in our work. Even your clothes couldn't escape being sold. We waited, but you were very late, late; very late, man.'<sup>43</sup> The mother clarifies the main reasons behind their transformation from purity to filth. These reasons are war, Sherif's absence, hunger, need and misery; all these leave no space for honour in its pure and fine meaning: 'War and your absence, hunger, need, loneliness, silly mottos and the misery of honour: this is what changed us.'<sup>44</sup>

Sherif blames his wife for not keeping the family's honour. He describes her as 'the shame that stained this house'.<sup>45</sup> Afaf, on her part, puts the blame on the shoulders of Sherif, who left her in the first month of their marriage and disappeared. In this light, she scolds him:

behave yourself in this place or you might find who will help you to behave. You have to reconsider your judgments here. Who shames this house, Sherif? Our house used to be a river of beauty which everyone used to clean their dirt in. You were the reason why our chastity exploded to pieces. Who is it that shames you, oh so honourable Sherif? (Screams) Who, you square?<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, the past and the present always collide in Al Zaidi's plays, for the concept of honour, initially associated with women's chastity, has drastically changed because of social and economic development in different walks of life. The difficulty of modern life imposes new needs against the desires of human beings and shakes some of their

seemingly fundamental norms. Afaf is right when she tells Sherif, 'Those birds were slaughtered long ago. These emotions, my old husband, do not fit in our new world now. When hunger comes through the door, love escapes through the window.'<sup>47</sup> Afaf was forced to embrace prostitution because of hunger. The choice to maintain her own life had been taken out of her hands. She tells Sherif, 'You can't understand what hunger did to us. It was a worm that ate our eyes.'<sup>48</sup> They are blinded by their suffering, therefore Sherif's view of honour no longer exists.

In the time of globalization, survival and material benefits matter, not spiritual values. Yet this does not lead to liberation of women, but to other forms of exploitation and suffering, albeit the female characters' agency is emerging. Afaf continues by affirming, 'I am the source of living here. Your mother's job is to receive customers. You are nothing but an urgent caller, a dead caller, a dead moment, a buried age ...'<sup>49</sup> The gender politics, which gives men privileges over woman, has been demolished in the world of *Rubbish*, reflecting the demolished values of the 1990s due to hunger and hardship. Even when Sherif claims that he is 'the man of the house',<sup>50</sup> Afaf mocks him, saying, 'You are an insect now, a bug, a fly that knows nothing but buzzing around, buzz, buzz, buzz. (*Leaves to her room*).'<sup>51</sup> Sherif's impotence becomes a source of sneering. Through his character, Al Zaidi draws our attention to the invalidity of gender discrimination. Afaf used to see him as a symbol of heroism, which is now lost due to his long absence and his new state of being crippled. Occasionally, the mother comes over to this idea. In her speech with Afaf, she points out, 'Men's muscles are nothing but ornaments to their bodies.'<sup>52</sup> By this, she denies their superiority over women completely.

In the confrontation with Sherif's intransigence, the mother and wife decide to get rid of him by putting him in a rubbish sack. Symbolically speaking, the process of leaving Sherif in a rubbish sack means the death of the absolute gender discrimination; the present time is the time for women. The mother thinks that all Sherif's views, opinions and perspectives about gender are nothing but meaningless rubbish. His pathetic speech almost at the end of the play refers to his self-knowledge. From inside the sack, he cries,

I am back, finally back, mother. You, my dear wife, Afaf, can you hear me? This house has always filled me with warmth. Is it invaded by cold too? (*Screams*) Mother, haven't we got enough bags? I was born in a bag and lived in a circle of bags. And here you are again, putting me in a bag again. This house can't include my manhood anymore. Can you receive a man who was stained by war, my wife? Do you worry that your bed will be invaded by an old whiteness. You pure woman! You used to be a very small thing, who knew nothing but love. Love. Your words were so little 'my dear husband, my Sherif, my love, my soul'. Was your love killed by the long dagger of waiting? (*Screams*) My wife ... Look back at me, you might remember this husband who is made of memories, dreams and crazy hopes. I am nothing now, except for a stray sharp edge that is lost looking for a piece of white flesh to settle down in. Mother ... You used to be the mother of our whole street. In your lap, all children would hide when running away from their parents. You, pure woman, what a huge sadness has made you leave your motherhood for something else. Where is your shyness? (*Screams louder*) Take me out of this bag!<sup>53</sup>

Finally, Sherif comes to realize that the world he lives in is no longer a man's world. This fact is uttered by his mother, who tells him that this is 'Our world. Women's world only'.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, if you want to live with us, you have to be blind and deaf: 'What we believe now, Sherif, can't meet what you have in your sweet memories of this chaste house.'<sup>55</sup> At the end, Sherif surrenders to his mother and wife's desires. To remain in the house, he accepts the vile work of receiving customers by the main door, and acts as a beggar there as well. The mother's and wife's happiness at the end reveals the predomination of women's discourse over patriarchal gender roles.

The daring treatment of the dilemma of the Iraqi society, and the focus on women's condition in Al Zaidi's text, grant the play its intriguing subject matter, making it a source of threat to the regime in Iraq in that difficult time of the 1990s. Al Zaidi's play is subversive, polemically highlighting the extent of the pain society felt due to the destruction that war brought to the family, physically as well as morally. Exaggerating the idea that when women have lost their chastity, it is only due to the huge impact of the pressure and injustice falling on her and on her life, is less of a lament of lost patriarchal values than a metaphor of the war-devasted country. The play that was kept as a reading text for special and trustworthy theatre-makers since the 1990s appeared publicly for the first time in 2005 among the published play collections of Al Zaidi, entitled *The Return of the Man Who Wasn't Absent*.<sup>56</sup> Despite the pivotal plot and significant subject matter, the playtext was hidden for about ten years before it saw the light again after 2003 among theatre students, with no actual or recorded public performances. Yet drama critics and theatre and literature scholars keep referring to the significance of the play as one of the bravest plays ever written during the 1990s.

### ***The Widow* (2014): a woman seeking an honourable love**

After 2003, Amir Al-Azraki worked as a translator for international news agencies, mainly for victimized Iraqis, particularly women. He was inspired to write his play *The Widow* by one particular story he heard from a woman he happened to meet and translate her story for another party.<sup>57</sup> The play was written after Al Azraki left Iraq for Canada. His play was premiered on 7 August 2014 at Summer Works Festival, Scotiabank Studio Theatre, Toronto, Canada, yet it is still waiting for a performance in Iraq, which may prove a challenging task, or even a risk, given the current sociopolitical situation in the country.

The play tells the story of a widow, Nour, whose husband is killed by the Americans during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nour is left with a two-year-old daughter. She falls in love with her professor, Samir, who gets her pregnant and then runs away. After quite some time and toward the end of the play, Samir returns, only to be killed by extremists. In his introduction to *The Widow*, Amir Al-Azraki states that

*The Widow* addresses an essential and substantial issue: the subjugation of widows in Iraq. In that country, one can uncover countless stories about violations against widows and divorced women. This play depicts the perilous social status conferred upon widows, and reveals the hypocrisy of so-called 'Islamic' societies in which women are severely victimized by practices embedded in patriarchal structures, and shaped

by traditional biases and religious prejudice. In this regard, *The Widow* destabilizes the concept of *ghira*, which serves as a central pillar of the belief system of many Arabs, and Iraqis in particular.<sup>58</sup>

The word *ghira* in the above quotation means not only 'jealousy', but also 'chivalry', 'nobility', 'courage', 'honour' and 'morality'. It is a male-centred term, which is associated with patriarchy.

In Iraq, *ghira* refers to the ethical obligation of a man to defend and protect his woman's honour at any cost. While the Islamic religion celebrates the dignity of women, because of the centrality of this term to men women are exploited and have lost their freedom. In other words, the poor understanding of Islamic teaching towards women by some people makes it easy for them to modify these teachings according to their patriarchal power.

As stated earlier, the violation of honour and reputation is highly connected with women's behaviour and with how people look at them. In *The Widow*, Al-Azraki seeds the idea of the subjugation of Iraqi women by mentioning the play *Nine Parts of Desire* by the Iraqi-American playwright Heather Raffo,<sup>59</sup> in which Samir, the professor, asks his students to prepare for their next lecture. Being a widow, Nour finds it difficult to assimilate into Iraqi society without being abused. This truth can be found in Arab and Islamic countries in general and in Iraqi society in particular. In a culture where young women lose their virginity only in honourable marriage, therefore, being a widow means that the woman is no longer virgin and single, which means that she is easily sexually exploited. In her speech with Samir, Nour bewails, 'Men look at me differently when they know I'm a widow. They think widows are only good for sex. I just want to live my life! Like any other woman.'<sup>60</sup> In such a society, women are easy prey. Accordingly, to find a suitable man who will accept marrying a widow is a rare and difficult task. The only chance for her is to be a second wife. Saddam's regime attempted to support these women in some ways. During the 1980s war with Iran, the regime declared that any man who marries a martyr's widow is given a certain amount of money as encouragement. Further, if the man was already married, the man would not need the first wife's legal and formal approval, as stated in the Iraqi Personal Status Law. Hence the man is exempted from this law if marrying a widow of a war martyr. In an intense argument between her and Samir, who thinks that Saddam was a killer, Nour affirms, 'And now we have many killers. Every day the body of a woman thrown into the river. Rumours spread, indecent, prostitute, a traitor working for the occupation, honour killings. Saddam's time was better.'<sup>61</sup>

Expectedly, Samir exploits Nour, whom he meets secretly in his friend's apartment. For Nour, the emotional deprivation made her take this relationship a long way. She believes that it should be her right. In her phone call to Rana, a friend, she defends her decision:

Yes, Rana, we are, and I don't care what you think, so don't start lecturing me. Because I want to. Because it's been two years. *Two years!* Well I'm sorry, and that's too bad. (Pause) Is that so terrible? (Pause) You're saying that if Karim died, God forbid, you would never want to be with a man again? (Pause.) And if you died, you would expect Karim ...? *Why is it different?* Why, why is it different? (Pause.) Yes, of course I know that. Everything is controlled by them. (Pause)<sup>62</sup>

In the above lines, Nour reveals the gender discrimination in Iraqi society. What is right for men cannot be the same for women. In this light, women are always blamed if their honour is violated. Because of gender politics, men are free to do whatever they want without being censored.

Given that Nour is a widow with a daughter, Samir refuses to marry her. His reluctant attitude towards Nour is indicative of his poor intentions. Like others, he only wants to enjoy his time with her. In her eloquent speech with Samir, Nour puts her finger on the poor circumstances of Iraqi women, especially widows. When Samir rejects her request for marriage, she violently and wisely revolts:

Because Mister Professor has to have a virgin for his wife? Is that it? Is that it? Are you just like all the others? What am I? Some kind of a used car? Good enough to make use of, to drive around in? But when you actually get a car of your own, it's got be shiny, untouched, new? Mister Professor Samir can't be seen with a second-hand wife? Is that really what it's about? Samir, I love you and you love me. We're both educated ... It's better than marrying a stranger, someone your parents arrange for you. What do you expect from a wife? I mean what do you want? Care? Sex? I can do both better than any new wife. Talk to me ... So you don't want to talk ... OK, then listen! I've been going through hell for our relationship: lying to my family, risking my reputation and life, endangering my daughter's life, enduring awful gossip about me, never mind my sincere feelings that you hurt deeply. Has it just been all about sex? I'm not a prostitute to desire whenever you need sex and have a place to take her to. I will give you some time to think about our relationship. Remember, I don't need a sexual partner. I need a man who can love me, and protect me, and be a safe haven for me and my daughter in this bloody country.<sup>63</sup>

To protect herself and her daughter from the tyranny of society, Nour looks for a stable relationship. In a patriarchal society, women are subject to oppression and injustice. This is why she repeatedly asks Samir to marry her. She uncovers her awareness over the dangers that may face her daughter, saying, 'I just worry about the world she's going to be growing up in. So many dangers. For girls, especially.'<sup>64</sup>

Like Al Zaidi's *Rubbish, The Widow* discusses the view of society that the violation of honour is a disgrace related to women only. Yet both plays make a wider political commentary on the impact of the war, and the cultural and economic burden that women, in particular, bear during such times and even during the aftermath of war. And just as an alliance occurred between Sherif's mother and Afaf, so an alliance occurs between Nour and Samir's mother to the extent that the two women have a moment of celebration. When Nour finally gets a job, Samir's mother insists that the two women should celebrate. While Nour is surprised by Um Samir's (Samir's mother) enthusiasm, the latter insists, 'Come on! Let's be a little crazy. Let's dance and have fun.'<sup>65</sup> This scene depicts solidarity amongst women and their capacity to support each other in both misery and happiness.

The relationship of the two women reaches a climactic moment when Nour complains to Um Samir, who becomes her confidant, that her boss is trying to abuse her by offering her a temporary marriage. With this incident, Al-Azraki touches on a quite sensitive religious

and social issue, which is the kind of marriage called *nikah al-mutaa*.<sup>66</sup> Although this kind of marriage is in one way or another exploited by some men as a form of adultery, it has been religiously legalized in certain parts of Iraq. Nour is a victim of such a marriage. Um Samir realizes that when Nour is talking about her boss, she is actually talking about her husband, Samir's father. Yet the mother does not reveal the truth to Nour, and instead she keeps silent until the end.<sup>67</sup> In both plays we see that women defend their rights to live peacefully far away from patriarchal control. In *The Widow*, Al-Azraki draws our attention to the male gaze that sees women as weak, as second-rate citizens who can be exploited with impunity. However, Samir's father, when he realizes Nour's situation, still ask her for sex. She severely rebukes him, intentionally ironically calling him 'Haji':<sup>68</sup> 'I am a woman with honor. Do you understand?'<sup>69</sup> Astonishingly, Samir's father did not previously know that Nour was his son's partner.

The situation of Iraqi women is made more difficult with the appearance of extremist groups. Women's freedom is severely restricted on the pretext of religious norms. Fatima Wadi, an actress who played the role of Afaf in a production of Al Zaidi's *Rubbish* in Al Nasiriyah in 2013, declares that what the play reveals is not limited to Iraq in the 1990s, but further extends to include the situation of Iraqi women throughout the modern and contemporary history of the country, as it witnessed continuous wars and conflicts of different kinds and shapes.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, what is significant about Al-Azraki's *The Widow* is that he tackles two forbidden subjects: sex and religion. These two subjects were not considered acceptable topics of discussion prior to 2003 and the situation is not much different after 2003. This clarifies the reason behind not staging it in Iraq. Samir is a victim of his liberal views of religion in a society that is still suffering the impact of wars. When he is consciously tormented by deserting the woman who loved him dearly, he decides to come back to Iraq and marry Nour. His return to Iraq costs him his life. His lectures about religion at the university lead to extremist groups identifying him as an infidel. The conclusion of Samir's life at the hands of the extremists confirms Al Zaidi's statement that 'no society is ever ready for wars, as these generate new mini wars within the family and the individual, and it is rarely that one can survive such wars'.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

The significance of these two plays resonates with the difficulties they have both faced when it comes to their staging in Iraq. Al Zaidi and Al-Azraki managed to portray an honest depiction of their views on women suffering, and, dramatically, they did so successfully. Each is situated in a different pivotal context of Iraq's contemporary history and its violence. Still, undoubtedly both Al Zaidi's and Al-Azraki's visions of their country have found their way to audiences at home and abroad. Through their struggles, these playwrights indicate the risk the writers take to present challenging sociopolitical subject matters in Iraq. Yet these examples still open a window of hope that women's oppression needs not to be fought solely by women or limited to female voices, but that this plight could benefit greatly from progressive male voices as well. The two playwrights examined here question the notion of honour and reputation placed on

the shoulders of women, showing that it is the patriarchal set-up in the foundations of domestic and public life, as well as in the nature of war, that is responsible for imposing that burden, which indeed sits heavily on the whole of society. It is vital to state that Al Zaidi and Al-Azraki are not the only examples of male playwrights writing about the oppression of women in Iraqi society, highlighting the importance of solidarity between genders, particularly if we keep in consideration that we are dealing with a Middle Eastern Iraqi context where female voices are easily marginalized. Such intentions show that the best way to uphold the values of honour and reputation is to stand up to oppressive and discriminatory interpretations of these values. And in a society where women's voices are easily dismissed, it is most honourable for men to stand up for the rights of women and call attention to their subjugation in society.

## NOTES

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- 19 Sarah Keeler, 'Peacebuilding: The Performance and Politics of Trauma in Northern Iraq', in Daniel Bertrand Monk and Jacob Mundy, eds., *The Post-conflict Environment: Investigation and Critique* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), pp. 68–102, here pp. 82–3.



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- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
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- 57 Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma, *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 169.
- 58 Ibid., p. 169.
- 59 Raffo's play revolves around the lives of nine Iraqi women, showing their dilemma during and after the Ba'ath regime, taking its title from a statement that is attributed to Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad. He is one of the central figures for Shia Muslims.
- 60 Al-Azraki and Shamma, *Contemporary Plays from Iraq*, p. 176.
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- 63 Ibid., p. 185.
- 64 Ibid., p. 195.
- 65 Ibid., p. 196.
- 66 *Nikah al-mutaa* is a temporary marriage, which can be seen in Twelver Shia Islam. It is a private contract with a short period and a specific dowry.
- 67 Al-Azraki and Shamma, *Contemporary Plays from Iraq*, p. 200.
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- 71 Ibid.

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