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Article

Non-Muslim Characters in Contemporary Iraqi Novel Between Religious Identity and the Failure of Cultural Pluralism

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Abstract

This paper explores critically the textual representation of non-Muslim characters, specifically Iraqi Jews and Christians, in selected contemporary Iraqi novels. The paper argues that the post-2003 Iraqi novel re-enacts the social dynamics of Othering the members of non-Muslim minorities in the hegemonic discourse of a predominantly Muslim society like that of Modern Iraq. The persistent identification of Iraqi Jews and Christians, in fiction and by their religious identity rather than their citizenship is symptomatic of the failure of pluralism in Iraqi society. Thus, Jewish and Christian characters figure in the selected novels as silenced voices at the margin of a society on the verge of collapse. Their fictional portrayal, as such, is framed by the socio-cultural ideologies since it plays on these characters' religious difference to explore the ways into which the modern Iraqi society imagines its Other. This politics of representation is responsible for the fashioning of these characters into stereotypes for the social difference/indifference.

Keywords: *contemporary Iraqi novel, non-Muslim characters, othering, pluralism, religious identity*

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Introduction

Iraqi Christians and Jews in modern Iraq endured various forms of suffering, primarily exclusion and marginalization by the "Other", their fellow citizens in the homeland. As religious minorities in a predominantly Muslim society, these groups faced challenges to co-existence, particularly during specific periods of political transformation. It results in a radical decrease in their numbers because of willing or forced migration. Additional hardships included alienation, the search for identity, and the pain of loss, whether in love or due to death. Due to the conservative nature of modern Iraqi society, religious minorities, like Iraqi Jews and Christians, were marginalized as their social identifier is more religious than national (Corticelli 2022). Historian Nissim Rejwan captures this marginalization of Iraqi Jews and Christians in 20th-century Iraqi society as follows:

Clearing the drains and the toilets was considered... the most menial of all menial jobs. It was undertaken almost exclusively by Christians from a particular small town in the north of Iraq called Talkeif, but there were also Jews who engaged in the work; but never, never a Muslim. As small children, we used to dub every Christian nazzah, the name Baghdadis gave a man who cleaned drains and toilets. (Rejwan 2004:6)

This scene is symbolic of the social dynamics of exclusion operating against Other non-Muslims in the social imaginary of modern Iraq. This stereotyping is, in a sense, similar in its nature and scope to that of racial profiling since it operates based on religious identity.

This social marginalization of the Iraqi Jews and Christians finds its counterpart in the Iraqi novel as well. Such characters rarely appear in 20th-century Iraqi novels, partly because of official censorship and partly because of the limited subjects of this novel. Even when such characters appear in these novels, they figure briefly on the margin of the narrative. They are also portrayed as stereotypes rather than individualized characters. Jewish Iraqis, for instance, are mainly figures in the novels of Jewish-Iraqi novelists like Samir Naqqash, Eli Amir, and Shimon Ballas, who were writing in exile, most often on the forced migration of Jews from Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s and their suffering and search for identity and home. Jewish characters rarely figure in novels by Muslim Iraqi novelists before 2003. Sa" di Yusuf (1934-2021) is an exception, but his contribution to the plight of the Jewish minority in Iraq after 1948 is in poetry rather than in the field of the novel.

As for the Christian Iraqis, they were, comparatively speaking, faring better than their Jewish counterparts with a broader spectrum of portrayal in the Iraqi novel since the 1950s. However, the temporal curve of their appearance in the Iraqi novel

from the 1950s to 1990s parallels their uneven and changing fortunes and status in Iraqi society. In Dhu al-Nun Ayyub's novel Al-Duktur Ibrahim (1954), Christian Iraqis are the educational elite of the Royal Iraq, in Ghaib Tu'ma Farman's When the Gypsies Came (1976), they are average Iraqis who stand for peaceful co-existence in the varied tapestry of Ba'athist Iraq. In Fadhil al-Azzawi's The Last of the Angels (1992) and Mahdi Issa al-Saqr's East Winds, West Winds (1997), they figure as victims of the plight of the second Gulf War and the harsh years of the economic blockade on Saddam's Iraq. It should be noted here that the Christian characters do not appear as main characters in any major Iraqi novel of the 20th century, unless written in exile by Christian Iraqi novelists. In fact, these characters are kept in the background of the narrative as either minor or type characters. They are not really an organic part of the plots of these novels. However, it is in the novels of the 1990s that the Christian Iraqis start to figure in the fictional portrayal in the collective as a community, but with a predominant emphasis on their religious identity as Christians rather than as Iraqi citizens.

However, it is only after 2003 that this character type started to frequently appear in the Iraqi novel, most probably due to the 'democratization' of the novel. The new atmosphere of liberty and democracy after the end of totalitarian regimes in the wake of the US-led invasion led to the erasure of official censorship and the lifting of restrictions on the scope of fictional coverage. The Iraqi novelist enjoyed a sense of freedom and responsibility to break new ground regarding the permissiveness of coverage. Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham explain this point eloquently in their book The Iraqi Novel: key writers, Key Texts (2013) when they state that: *"Freed from political repression, Iraqi novelists are now engaged in a process of soul-searching and a reassessment of their country's modern history through the medium of fiction"* (Caiani and Cobham 2013: vii).

This is furthered by the contemporary Iraqi novelists' growing desire to court international readers, as chances for international publication via translation were more prosperous than ever. The Iraqi novel is now ready to accommodate the idea of a multi-ethnic, multicultural Iraq that can give room to non-Muslim Iraqi character-types to figure actively in its fiction. Pluralism became a distinctive condition of Iraqi society, as portrayed in the Iraqi novel after 2003. Ronen Zeidel highlights the Iraqi novel after 2003:

Started reflecting the pluralism of Iraqi society and Iraq as a state. Almost all the country's components (communities, sects, ethnic groups, and religious groups), no matter how small (including the extinct Jewish community), were brought to the fore in the narratives of the novels. This was a self-conscious reaction by a generation of Iraqi writers to the repressive

mores of the previous regime, as well as a call for help to save the heterogeneity of Iraqi society, which was now in grave danger, especially from political Islam and its derivatives. (Zeidel 2020:1)

Zeidel considers this restoration of pluralism and the multicultural character of Iraqi society after 2003 as the ultimate responsibility of the contemporary Iraqi novelist to recover national identity. This is the intellectual agenda behind the resurgence of non-Muslim Iraqi character types in the contemporary Iraqi novel.

The present study critically explores the nature, scope, and aesthetic particularities of this 'resurgence' of the Jewish and Christian characters in the contemporary Iraqi novel. The paper argues that through the thematization of the plight of existence of Jewish and Christian Iraqis in the 'new' Iraq, the novels under study see the privileging of religious identity as consequential to the failure of pluralism in the Iraqi society. This is in direct contrast to Zeidel's argument that after 2003, Iraqi novelists' representation of Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities is part of the process of recovering national identity by imagining a plural society that addresses and comes to terms with the defective anthropology of pre-2003 Iraqi society (Zeidel 2020). The problem with such theorization is that it overlooks the persistent identification of Jewish and Christian Iraqi characters in the social imaginary in the post-2003 Iraqi novels. This is rather a symptom of the failure of pluralism as a social state of ethnic and religious harmonious co-existence, because such characters in fiction as in reality are not the 'us' as much as the 'other' of a predominantly Muslim community. They would never escape the stereotyping of this community as non-Muslim, as if Islam is the ultimate condition of nationality in this country. Belonging in such a society is not a choice but a privilege communally granted on the grounds of religion rather than race. Contemporary Iraqi novel seems to re-enact these societal dynamics of othering and stereotyping of non-Muslim minorities in their construction of Jewish and Christian characters.

However, the present paper agrees with findings by Al-Tuhami (2019), Jassim (2017), Zeidel (2017), and Khalaf (2014) on the question of religious identity and its consequential issue of belonging present in the portrayal of Iraqi Jews and Christians in post-2003 Iraqi novels. However, they differ in the nature and interpretation of this definition due to religious identity. While these critics take this religious identity to be an indicator of the religious and ethnic pluralism of Iraqi society, the present paper presents a counterargument. Moreover, these past studies see the suffering of this character type as a sort of existential anguish that reflects on the disrupted social fabric in which this character type exists. The present paper sees this highly hegemonic social space as the ultimate source of this individual suffering. It excludes this character type

from the social being based on religious identity as non-national or marginal to the social fabric.

Discussion

History, religion, and the demonization of the Jews

The character of the Iraqi Jew in the contemporary Iraqi novel is a curious mixture of Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens' Fagin because there is no such thing as an Iraqi Jew. There is only the Jew of history and the popular imagination.

Although Ali Badr's Papa Sartre (2001) predates the change of 2003, it is the first Iraqi novel in the new millennium to feature a Jewish Iraqi in its character set. This novel is set in Baghdad during the 1960s. Its main characters include Shaoul, a man betrayed by his wife, who abandoned him and migrated to London, leaving him behind with their children. Shaoul owns a shop that serves as a façade to express his philosophy. He embodies the archetype of the domineering figure seeking a subordinate to control, demonstrated through his employment of a subordinate worker in his shop. Shaoul attempts to impose his philosophy on the Jewish character Salim but fails due to the latter's personality. As portrayed in the novel, Shaoul accumulates wealth but refrains from spending it.

Another key character is Elaine, the daughter of the Jewish moneylender Ephraim, who is depicted as a cunning individual skilled in deceit to acquire wealth. These characters reflect stereotypical representations of Jews in Iraqi society, particularly in their association with moneylending, miserliness, and deceptive practices that enable the accumulation of wealth without enjoying its benefits. This is further illustrated by their residence in the novel's depiction of the Jewish quarter, which is described as a filthy and decayed neighborhood. This portrayal aligns with historical realities, as the areas historically inhabited by Jews in Baghdad were among the city's oldest and most impoverished neighborhoods, remnants of which still exist today. The novel subtly alludes to an underlying sentiment among Jews, a pervasive sense of alienation and anticipation of eventual displacement to a *"promised land."* This sentiment is manifested in their hoarding of wealth as a portable asset, facilitating an eventual forced migration. The author seemingly underscores this notion through his narrative, reflecting a sociocultural critique of the Jewish experience in Iraq.

The first mention of Shaoul appears in the narrator's quest to uncover the philosopher's story, as he attempts to write his biography and gather information about him in his residence in Baghdad's Al-Sadriya neighborhood. The narrator states: *"After that, I located the shop of Shaoul the Jew in the Al-Sadriya market. It was a small shop*

that had changed a thousand times since Shaoul's migration to London in the 1970s. I had to map out the transportation routes carefully." (Papa Sartre 2009:15). The novel provides a more detailed description of Shaoul's character, stating: "In addition to that, Jasib the one-eyed would carefully listen to the lessons Shaoul the Jew taught him, Shaoul, the conspirator against Arab existentialism, who taught Jasib the insults that would irritate and anger his traditional rival, Abdul Rahman. Jasib would station his wheeled cart near Shaoul's shop in the covered market of the Al-Sadriya neighborhood." (Murtatha, Ali, (June 2025)). Shaoul is also depicted as a depraved and immoral individual who purchases lewd photographs from Ismail Hadoub. The text states: *"In fact, he only came to the Al-Sadriya neighborhood for one specific client, addicted to these photographs, as there was no one willing to pay as much as Shaoul. Although he haggled and delayed payment in exhausting negotiations, he eventually paid Ismail the amount he demanded."* (Papa Sartre 2009:72). These portrayals highlight Shaoul's multifaceted personality, including his manipulation of others, subversion of philosophical ideas, and indulgence in questionable moral conduct. The character is a focal point for examining the novel's broader social and philosophical themes.

The novel meticulously constructs the character of Shaoul in a manner reminiscent of a traditional portrait of the Jewish merchant stereotype. He is described as follows: *"This is what Shaoul said as he smacked his lips, his tongue occasionally darting out to moisten his lips. He stuck it out like a skinned red strip of flesh, while his eyes darted behind his thick prescription glasses, flat, lifeless eyes that moved right and left like pliable beads. His eyebrows had disappeared behind the frame of his black plastic glasses, with only two hairless arcs moving rhythmically."* (Papa Sartre 2009:73–74). Shaoul's intelligence is highlighted through his schemes, such as his attempt to transform Ismail into a completely different person: *"... He was also the miserly wealthy man, obsessed with accumulating wealth for himself while pretending to build a utopia of happiness on earth… Despite his immense wealth, he only purchased obscene photographs at the lowest possible prices, for how could he establish a utopia of purity, sacrifice, and happiness on earth?"* (Papa Sartre 2009:80–81). Through these depictions, the novel paints Shaoul as a shrewd yet miserly figure, embodying a paradoxical persona: one who is exceedingly rich yet unwilling to spend his wealth meaningfully. His character is marked by manipulative intelligence and a pretense of altruism, all while pursuing personal gain under the guise of constructing an idealized vision of society. This layered portrayal contributes to the broader critique embedded in the narrative.

In addition to Shaoul, the novel introduces another Jewish character, Salim, who is described in starkly negative terms: *"The detestable Jew who perched his glasses on his nose and looked down on others like a hedgehog. When he spoke, his words came out nasally.*

Salim did not like Ismail, as he considered him a great fraud who had come to swindle his employer out of money in exchange for worthless paper photographs." (Papa Sartre 2009:72). Salim's characterization adds another layer to the novel's depiction of Jewish figures, emphasizing traits such as arrogance and suspicion. His disdain for Ismail underscores his role as a sceptical and judgmental character, further contributing to the narrative's exploration of interpersonal and societal dynamics. The novel, through the theme of Salim and Ismail escaping Shaoul's control and his so-called ideal utopia, one he believed no one could leave, offers an implicit critique of Shaoul's philosophy. This philosophy reduces happiness to material wealth within rigid frameworks, confined to comfortable living with no hope or aspiration for change. The narrative contrasts this philosophy with that of the existentialist philosopher Abdul Rahman, the novel's protagonist. It becomes evident to the reader that Shaoul is merely a secondary archetype, employed primarily to highlight Abdul Rahman's character and philosophy, despite occupying a considerable portion of the narrative.

The plight of the Jewish characters in the novel is multifaceted and reflects more profound existential and societal dilemmas. These layers are critical to understanding the tension between Shaoul's materialistic worldview and the existentialist ideals of Abdul Rahman, which advocate for freedom, self-determination, and the rejection of preordained systems of happiness.

In contrast to this portrayal, the Jewish character in Awad Ali's novel Marines' Milk is depicted with a nuanced perspective. Rosa, a Jewish character, embodies conflicting emotions regarding Iraq. She preserves her father's memoirs, documenting his experiences as someone born, raised, and who once lived in Iraq. Rosa expresses a desire to visit Iraq, contingent upon the establishment of a government she describes as *"secular."* Her father's memoirs vividly highlight a strong attachment to his roots, symbolized by Iraq, despite the struggles of migration to Tel Aviv and the racial discrimination experienced by Iraqi Jews, akin to that endured by non-European Jewish immigrants. The deteriorating economic conditions ultimately compelled her father to emigrate. Before departing, he expressed resentment toward the nation that displaced them, noting that they were an integral part of its history and had significantly contributed to its development. Simultaneously, he lamented their rejection and lack of recognition in the land where they sought refuge and stability.

The Jewish character, represented by the father, is portrayed with intellectual and historical maturity, exhibiting a high level of awareness. This perhaps reflects the contradictions that dominate Iraqi society, with its peculiar judgments of the "other," after once being a model of tolerance and co-existence rooted in the harmony of its

diverse components. However, it appears that other societies fare no better. In his memoirs, the father writes:

It was both painful and awe-inspiring to see school textbooks devoid of our history, culture, and the names of our writers, intellectuals, rabbis, scholars, poets, and community leaders. We, who in just the last century produced some of Iraq's finest writers, judges, and thinkers, found ourselves begging for the country's recognition of us. We felt like orphans at the table of the miserly. We remember, with sadness, how the rulers of Iraq at the time described us simply as Jews. We left Iraq as Jews, only to arrive in Israel as Iraqis (Marines' Milk 2010:109–110)

This excerpt underscores the complex dynamics of identity, displacement, and belonging, capturing the multifaceted struggles faced by the Iraqi Jewish community.

In *Ya Maryam*, Sinan Antoon sets the stage for a positive depiction of the Jewish character as a fellow citizen by emphasizing that this character is no different from others in Iraqi society. This is achieved by highlighting the shared struggles faced by all Iraqis during the American occupation of 2003 and the ensuing chaos, marked by the dominance of lawless groups. These groups targeted various ethnic and religious minorities, yet the novel introduces the idea of a shared destiny despite the atrocities inflicted upon minorities in conflicts fuelled by hidden agendas. Through the dialogue between characters, the contradictions governing the actions of armed groups are revealed, emphasizing that Iraqis were targeted irrespective of their religion or sect. One character observes: *"Listen, my dear. The issue is more complex than Christian or Muslim. It is about politics and interests, not religion"* (Ya Maryam 2012:23). The narrative then reinforces this theme by returning to the 1950s, portraying the friendship of three students from Baghdad College: Youssef, a Christian; Naseem, a Jew; and Salem, a Muslim. Their bond is so close that the father calls them the *"pack of wolves."* The text describes: *"It was not surprising to see the three of them standing side by side in the photograph. They used to sit together in class and were always together in the courtyard. The father even called them the pack of wolves."* (Ya Maryam 2012:43). This depiction underscores the interconnectedness and unity that once characterized Iraq's diverse communities, challenging the divisions that later emerged during political and social turmoil.

Naseem and his father initially demonstrate confidence that the situation in Iraq would not escalate to the expulsion of Jews, even after the issuance of the law stripping Jews of their citizenship. The narrative highlights this sentiment: *"Naseem showed no concern, even in the final months before his departure, when Youssef and Salem would question him, especially as rumours began circulating that some Jews had started emigrating or fleeing. However, Naseem's father was not contemplating such a move... Naseem later revealed that his*

father had been dismissed from his job, and the family's funds and properties had been frozen. As a result, the family decided to join others who had registered for migration. They heard nothing but the sound of their footsteps and the rustling of palm fronds and tree branches beneath their feet, stirred by the wind, as if bidding Naseem farewell. Youssef asked him, 'When are you leaving?' Naseem replied, 'Maybe I do not know in two days.' They embraced warmly in front of their house in Bataween, and tears welled in his eyes during the farewell." (Ya Marya 2012:43–44). This passage poignantly reflects the anguish of displacement, the sense of loss, and the uncertainty of the future. It underscores how societal rejection played a central role in the fragmentation and alienation of Iraqi Jews, both in their homeland and in Tel Aviv, the land to which they were forced to migrate. The narrative poignantly captures the emotional weight of their departure and the profound impact of their uprooting on both personal and collective levels.

In Inaam Kachachi's Tashari, the presence of Jewish characters is documented as an integral part of the Iraqi social fabric in Baghdad and Diwaniya. The novel reflects on the subsequent stripping of citizenship from Jews and their expulsion from universities, while juxtaposing these events with the relationships of the protagonist, Dr. Wardiya, with Jewish individuals, particularly Umm Yaqoub and Abu Yaqoub, who lived peacefully in Diwaniya. The narrative highlights the contributions of Jewish women to charitable associations, portraying a positive and inclusive environment that underscores their sense of belonging. Dr. Wardiya recalls: *"In high school, Wardiya came to understand the meaning of patriotism. In her class, there were four Muslim students, two Christian students, and seventeen Jewish students."* (Tashari 2015:76). Wardiya, tasked with collecting donations for injured student protestors shot by the police, recalls how the Jewish students contributed like everyone else, whether reluctantly or willingly. The narrative underscores the strong connection Jews felt toward their homeland, which had provided them with a good life, and their awareness that the Torah was written in Babylon. Political conflicts had not yet disrupted Baghdad's social cohesion during this earlier period. Wardiya's Muslim and Jewish classmates would visit her during Easter celebrations: *"Her Muslim and Jewish classmates would come to celebrate Easter with her. They would sit in the guest room like adults, drinking tea and eating kleicha."* (Tashari 2015:81–82). Through these depictions, the novel paints a picture of an Iraq where co-existence and mutual respect were once hallmarks of its diverse communities, before the divisive effects of political and social upheaval disrupted this harmony.

In Khudair Faleh Al-Zaidi's Atlas Azran Al-Baghdadi, the characters of Dawood and Rabbi Ezra narrate the harrowing events of the bloody civil war between 2006 and 2008 through the perspective of a fictional figure whose presence transcends

the boundaries of place. On the margins of the narrative, there are side stories, including one about some Jews hiding in Iraq, whom terrorist groups attempt to eliminate. These groups pursue a report published about them in a magazine called Al-Nawaris (The Seagulls). A journalist who worked for the magazine is arrested and, during interrogation, reveals some parts of the report. Among these stories is that of the last Jewish Baghdadi, *"an elderly man named Ibrahim Nahim, whose funeral was secretly transported from Nasiriyah. He worked as a coal seller in the city and had a single son named Dawood, who still lives in hiding. Ibrahim retired from work in his final days and remained confined to his home until he passed away, leaving his son trapped inside the southern city, characterized by its enthusiasm for all that is new"* (Atlas Azran Al-Baghdadi 2015:79).

Elsewhere in the novel, Dawood bin Abi Ibrahim, the Jew, is described on page 94: *"A retired intellectual from the cultural scene. About him, it was said: My dear, after 2006 exactly, Dawood stopped attending the café and the neighborhood in general, even though the residents of his neighborhood did not harm him. He coexisted with them without distinctions, isolation, or segregation. He married a Kurdish woman and had three children with her"* (Atlas Azran Al-Baghdadi 2015:94). The novel portrays a positive image of Jewish families who remained in Iraq after 2003, living in various provinces in an atmosphere of co-existence and stability. However, they concealed their identities for fear of harm (Al-Zaidi 2015:95, 100). All of this is documented through the journey of the story's protagonists, Samer and Nora, as they search for the figure of Elias Raghid, a Jewish man hiding in Nasiriyah, the last Jew of southern Iraq.

In the novel, Dawood himself points out that the number of Jews in Iraq exceeds the commonly known figure and that they are in hiding not out of fear of Iraqis, but rather due to fear of American and Israeli Jews. This highlights the positive image the novel seeks to portray, following the presence of Jews in Iraq as a significant and rooted community that has contributed to Iraqi civilization and history across the ages (Atlas Azran Al-Baghdadi 2015:97). The plight of Jewish characters is depicted in various forms, primarily as a struggle with identity, acceptance of the "Other," and doubts regarding national belonging (Al-Tuhami 2019). This is furthered in Jasim Mutair's Two Lovers from the Land of Mesopotamia, where the crisis of fragmentation within a single identity is explored. The events revolve around a love story between Rachel and Kerji, two Jewish individuals living in Basra, and the letters exchanged between them amidst the political and economic circumstances faced by Iraqi Jews in the mid-20th century. These include forced displacement and the looting of Jewish property.

Similarly, Tahseen Karmian's The Sons of the Jewish Woman examines the plight of the diaspora from a different perspective. The story unfolds when three

Jewish siblings, separated during childhood after being abandoned by their Jewish mother, unexpectedly reunite as adults. Each sibling has lived vastly different lives, representing various facets of Iraqi society. The novel is rich in symbolic depth, characterization, and spatial construction. It also highlights the internal turmoil of the Jewish identity, even within its own community, while simultaneously reflecting the broader plight of rejection endured by "the Other" despite the shared bond of blood. The three brothers, Captain Malih, Sheikh Saleh, and the gypsy dancer Faleh, symbolize major ideological and cultural currents in a society marked by its diverse minorities and ideologies (The Sons of the Jewish Woman 2011).

These novels, among others, address the complexities of Jewish identity in Iraq, blending themes of displacement, marginalization, and the broader socio-political dynamics of a multi-ethnic society.

Christians: The Politics of Exclusion and the Crisis of Belonging

Although indigenous to the country, Christians fare no better than Jews in Iraqi society. They inhabit the Other of a highly hegemonic society regarding their religious difference. Their fictional portrayal betrays strong tendencies to the stereotypical, as they are, as a rule, depicted as peaceful and submissive citizens by virtue of the peaceful nature of their religion. They suffer a lot, but their suffering is almost stoical, with deeper insights into the psychology of contemporary Iraqi society.

Inaam Kachachi's novels, notably Tashari and The American Granddaughter, are pioneering in portraying Iraqi Christians. This character type acquires its significance from the rich socio-historical context characteristic of Kechachi's novels, especially her gendered and cultural spaces (Jadwe 2020:139). One such memorable Christian character is the protagonist of the novel Tashari, Dr. Wardiya, who was born and raised in Mosul before moving with her family to Baghdad. She studied medicine and worked in Diwaniya, a southern Iraqi city, where she spent most of her professional years. Living in co-existence and peace, she played a significant role through her work at Diwaniya's hospital, which brought her closer to many people and earned her a distinguished place in the community. In Diwaniya, she meets the man who would become her husband, Dr. Jirjis, with whom she has three children. Like many Christian community members, her children migrate to different parts of the world. From this dispersion, the novel derives its distinctive title, Tashari. Her children urge Dr. Wardiya to join them despite the challenges and her advanced age of over 80. Eventually, she reaches Paris, where she reflects on her memories. A bond grows between her and Iskandar, the son of her nephew's daughter, who understands her nostalgia and designs a virtual cemetery for her relatives.

The plight of Christians seeking asylum is evident: *"I saw around me Iraqis who had come to receive their relatives on the same flight, Christian families who had been displaced, threatened, or had lost members in church bombing incidents"* (Tashari 2015). The protagonist reflects strong social integration in her workplace, affirming her deep-rooted sense of belonging, as shown through her choice of clothing in a conservative city with a tribal nature (Tashari 2015). Despite differences in cultures, ideas, and, most importantly, religions, she integrates into the city's community: *"Whenever she felt suffocated, she would take herself to Alawiya Shathra. Unlike her formal mingling with doctors' wives, senior officers, and officials, her visits became a recreational ritual. It was as if she were traveling to a planet that contained as much spirituality as it did the clay of this earth, the very clay from which humans were molded... Alawiya, what is the secret behind your tea? The blessed woman laughs, revealing two golden teeth, her dimples sinking deep into her cheeks. 'It is Abbas' tea, doctor!'"* (Tashari 2015:73).

The American Granddaughter addresses the themes of identity and conflict, with its characters belonging to a Christian community that cherishes memories of life in their homeland. However, the events following 2003 compelled them to emigrate. Among them is Zeina, the protagonist, whose father is tortured, forcing the family to migrate and settle in America. Zeina, raised by her grandmother Rahma due to her mother's job, is later compelled by circumstances to accept a position as a translator for the U.S. military in Iraq. The character's plight is vividly depicted in her nostalgic recollections of cherished memories at her grandfather's house. When she returns to these same places as a translator for the occupying army, the contrast in her role becomes apparent. She meditates nostalgically: *"Heirlooms passed down from the days of Mosul and the old stone house perched on the riverbank, the house of Jirjis Al-Saaur, my great-grandfather, who earned his title from his care for the Church of Al-Tahira"* (The American Granddaughter 2009:13). The pull of childhood memories culminates in her assertion of belonging to home: *"How could I not love Mosul, where everyone spoke with my grandmother's accent?"* (The American Granddaughter 2009:13)

Upon her return to Iraq with the U.S. military, Zeina's emotions become conflicted, torn between nostalgia and fear. This is particularly evident as she tours Mosul with the military convoy, feeling both a longing for the land where she was born and loved and the fear of putting her comrades at risk. In another instance, the value of the Christian character's sense of belonging is highlighted during the oath-taking ceremony for obtaining U.S. citizenship, which represents a means of achieving stability after years of displacement and deprivation. The novel vividly portrays the mother's conflicted emotions as she chokes on her words while reciting the oath, which

symbolizes her detachment from the identity she was born into and lived by: *"I stretched out my hand and clasped Mama's stiff hand, while the crowd placed their hands over their hearts, chanting the national anthem played by the jazz band: 'God Bless America... God Bless America.' The voice of the Iraqi woman, Batool Al-Saaur, my mother, was the only discordant note, wailing in Arabic: 'Forgive me, father... Yaba, forgive me.' How did the voice of Youssef, my mother's father, find its way to University Street in Detroit?"* (The American Granddaughter 2009:29).

The plight of characters belonging to minorities is closely tied to the extent of freedom in their social environment. According to Jesse Matz's categorization of multicultural novels, these works fall under "minority novels," which are rooted in cultural diversity (Yass and Ibrahim 2023). This genre primarily flourished in Europe, emphasizing the right of minorities to have a narrative voice that reflects their cultural, social, and religious identity (Matz 2016). In The Modern Novel, Jesse Matz highlights the importance of giving minorities a voice, as translated by Lutfiya Al-Dulaimi (2016). Novels of this type often depict the suffering, marginalization, and challenges faced by minorities due to political transformations, which force them into migration and displacement. These novels underscore the right to individual and cultural difference while promoting a national identity tied to the larger society, represented here as the homeland (Jassim 2017).

In the novels of Maysaloon Hadi, Christian characters have a significant presence, as seen in her works (Bride's Tea, A Light Pink Dream, Zaynab, Mary, and Yasmin, The Most Beautiful Story in the World). A recurring pattern in the representation of Christian characters can be traced across these novels. In her A Light Pink Dream, the character of Umm Sarah, a Christian woman, encapsulates the plight of Iraqi Christians caught in the crossfire between U.S. soldiers, their guards, and armed militias:

I began to recite Ayat al-Kursi in the room, but out of sheer panic, I forgot how it continued. Tears welled in my eyes like water droplets as I begged the woman to remind me of the verse. She replied, tears streaming down her cheeks like rivulets: 'I am Christian.' I had not known that Sarah and her mother were Christian, nor had it crossed my mind before now, though I often saw her drawing the sign of the cross on her face and shoulders. (A Light Pink Dream 2009:66).

Although this moment highlights the shared human suffering transcending religious boundaries, the pervasive play of religious identity as difference underlies the whole scene. This is supposed to be a moment of shared humanity, but the unbalancing of power relations identifies the Iraqi women by their faith. This power

status disruption gives the Christian woman a voice and confers power on her. Now she has a voice.

Similarly, in Bride's Tea, the narrative unfolds during the post-American occupation era, marked by daily violence claiming the lives of innocent people. Among the characters is Abdul Noor, a Christian pharmacist whose memory lingers in the mind of Sheikh Abdul Rahman, a Muslim man who used to teach the Quran and grammar to Mahmoud, the novel's protagonist, who now resides in a nursing home. Sheikh Abdul Rahman recalls his good relationship with Abdul Noor: *"Sheikh Abdul Rahman continued speaking without pause: 'There was a Christian pharmacist named Abdul Noor. I used to buy medicine from him back in the day. He had a beautiful, elegant, and renowned pharmacy and was youthful, handsome, wealthy, and well-known. However, it seems he had no children, or maybe he never married at all... because just a few days ago, I discovered, after some back-and-forth and questions and answers, that he was staying here with me in this nursing home. He passed away yesterday. Imagine how this place brought us together.'"* (Hussien, Akram Ali (June 2025)).

The novel takes a tolerant stance toward the "Other," particularly through the continuation of the dialogue, which addresses an important aspect of interfaith relationships in a shared society: the question of religion and the fate of individuals according to different beliefs. In an internal dialogue, Mahmoud ponders the fate of Abdul Noor after death, reflecting a deep-seated tension surrounding views of non-Muslims. However, Sheikh Abdul Rahman, with a tone of moderation, dispels this ambiguity by offering a balanced perspective, contrasting the rigid and exclusionary notions often embedded in societal attitudes toward non-Muslims:

The novel *Zaynab, Mary, and Yasmin* explores identity through its central event: the exchange of two young girls between a Muslim family and a Christian family. Throughout the narrative, the presence of Christian characters is portrayed as equal to that of Muslim characters, with parallel events and details shared between them. This narrative structure brings to the forefront the complex issue of religious identity, the acceptance of the "Other," and the perspectives that each faith community holds toward the other. The novel sheds light on a specific societal issue, presenting Muslim and Christian viewpoints to depict two balanced perspectives (Mohseen 2016). By doing so, the novel engages in a nuanced discussion of interfaith relationships, identity, and co-existence, highlighting how deeply rooted beliefs about the Other can influence personal and communal dynamics while fostering an understanding of shared humanity.

The main character and narrator of events compares herself and her alternate version, reflecting the crisis of identity she suffers from and the anguish of being

unable to choose between the reality she was raised in and the freedom she dreams of living. This internal conflict highlights her fragmented sense of self:

In front of this dressing table, I decide to go to Mary's house. I decided to become Yasmin, the person I have always wanted to be... Yasmin is the strong one who laughs, shakes hands warmly, kisses both cheeks, and looks people in the eyes when speaking, like Tabarak, Tara, and Tamara. Not like me or my mother, Zaynab, who, when she laughs, becomes superstitious and says, 'Oh Lord, let it be a good laugh and let its evil fall on the devil.' Moreover, if the doorbell rings after dinner, she reads Surat Al-Falaq and says, 'Wait for me... come with me... help me.' (Zaynab, Mary, and Yasmin 2016:64).

Mary, the Christian woman raising a Muslim child, is portrayed as a proactive and dynamic character. She does not carry a tragic or disturbed past; instead, she focuses on correcting the mistake that led to the exchange of her daughter with another family's child. However, this effort unfolds against a backdrop of societal and religious tensions between two families of differing faiths in a predominantly Muslim community, where minorities hold tightly to their identities (Khalaf 2014). Mary emerges as arguably the strongest character in the novel, striving to reclaim her biological daughter and desiring to keep Yasmin, the child she raised, who shares her faith and characteristics. Her ambitions extend beyond her immediate circumstances, as she pushes for the entire family to migrate to Canada, driven by the pressures of sectarian violence and the persecution of minorities, especially Christians, after 2003. Mary's determination and vitality are vividly described in the novel: *"She runs, laughs, and leads me to one conclusion: 'Let us go to the spray, let us go to the words, let us go to five, or three, or more crosses... let us go to a fly-free house, let us go to the world.'"* (Zaynab, Mary, and Yasmin 2012:61). Her ambition is also emphasized: *"Mary now wants to find her freedom in a new place; she wants to migrate, followed by Edwar, Abdul Ahad, and the two Yasmins"* (Zaynab, Mary, and Yasmin 2012:70, 110, 118).

The positive aspects of Mary's character are further illuminated through Yasmin's comparisons between Mary and Zaynab, who mistakenly raised her as her daughter. This dynamic underscores Yasmin's internal struggle, where Mary represents empowerment and confidence, while Zaynab symbolizes the constraints of tradition, superstition, and an overbearing sense of caution. Through Mary's strong and compassionate character, the novel explores identity, belonging, and the longing for freedom amidst societal and religious complexities.

In Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad, the plight of the elderly character Elishva, the mother of Daniel, who resides in the Bataween neighborhood, is highlighted. She regularly attends Sunday Mass at the Mar Odisho Church while awaiting a phone call from her daughters and their families living abroad. She depends

on the *"Thuraya"* satellite phone belonging to Father Josiah, the Assyrian priest, around whom many people gather, waiting their turn to use the phone to contact their relatives abroad. This is set before mobile phone networks were introduced in Iraq. Elishva's plight reflects multiple dimensions of the struggles faced by Christians in post-2003 Iraq following the emergence of terrorist groups.

Similarly, in *Papa Sartre*, a stereotypical depiction of Christian characters in Iraqi society is also presented. One such character is Hanna Youssef, an open-minded, sociable man who lives freely in his home, blending harmoniously with the predominantly Christian atmosphere of the Bataween neighborhood in Baghdad. Hanna Youssef and his wife, Nuno, are secondary characters who serve as a source for the search for Shaul, the Jewish man around whom the novel's events revolve. The author describes Hanna Youssef: *"Our meeting was warm and friendly. Hanna, who welcomed me, was always smiling, and his small mustache on his lips looked like a line of red wine"* (Papa Sartre 2009:6).

Another character introduced in the novel is Edmund Qushli, who is described as an existentialist philosopher. Edmund falls in love with Nadia Khaddouri, his Christian cousin. However, Nadia enters a troubled romantic relationship with Abdul Rahman, a Muslim man she met at the library. Edmund struggles with the idea of love between a Christian and a Muslim, which causes an internal conflict between his belief in human freedom and his unrequited love for Nadia. *"A Christian… ha, a Christian, and you love a Muslim?"* he said. She fell silent, showing no sign of embarrassment. The covered lampshades emitted a soft glow. Her eyes drifted away from him, gazing out the window as though lost in a distant thought. *'Do you not love?'* she asked. *'I thought you did not differentiate between Christians and Muslims… Moreover, you do not?' 'When I love, I do not differentiate… love does not discriminate,' he said, his eyes welling with tears"* (Papa Sartre 2009:194). Edmund wrestles with the conflict between existentialism and Trotskyism, reflecting the ideological defeat of the Trotskyist (himself) at the hands of the existentialist (Abdul Rahman). *"It tortured him to see Sartre triumph over Trotsky. It pained him to imagine Abdul Rahman walking happily with Nadia down the street or sitting with her in the café while she was happy with him"* (Papa Sartre 2009).

Ali Bader re-enacts the same politics of representation in his other novel, The Road to Tell al-Mutran. The narrative weaves together psychological, religious, social, and existential struggles, centering on the conflict between life and death (Kzar et al., 2024:1109). All the characters in the story belong to Iraq's Christian community, and the events take place in a picturesque Christian town in northern Iraq, known for its enchanting winter atmosphere. The protagonist, the primary narrator, is assigned to work as an Arabic teacher in a church. He introduces himself as follows:

At that time, I was completely unemployed. After being discharged from the army following the war's end, Lilian intervened on my behalf with one of her relatives, the well-known Christian merchant Najib Marqus, to find me a job. He suggested I work in a large roulette hall on the Meridian Hotel's upper floor in Baghdad, owned by his young wife, Janet Marqus. I worked there as a ticket seller for six months. However, I left this job, which required me to spend all night with drunkards, gamblers, and prostitutes, enduring their erratic moods. When Lilian failed to find me a decent job, she began mediating with a book trader specializing in scientific and medical encyclopedias (The Road to Tell al-Mutran 2005:8).

The protagonist faces the problem of social acceptance in Tell al-Mutran: The protagonist struggles with societal acceptance in the town where he works. His presence is overshadowed by the locals' superstitious fear of outsiders, leading to their avoidance and rejection. Even the church's deputy priest (Qasha) seeks housing in the town center to distance himself from the local community, as the residents near the church distrust strangers. These fears are further exacerbated when some of the ominous prophecies made by a Kurdish fortune-teller in the town come true. These include the deaths of the priest and the Qasha, the release of a prisoner who later murders his wife, Elaine (with whom the protagonist had a romantic relationship), the death of Shamiran's grandfather (another woman the protagonist loved), and the discovery of hidden treasure. These events solidify the protagonist's perception as a bringer of misfortune, leading to widespread social rejection (Kzar et al., 2024:1112).

Sinan Antoon follows the exact blueprint in his I'jaam by Sinan Antoon, the central character, Furat, a young Christian studying English at university, embodies a profound struggle. Furat opposes the Ba'ath regime that ruled Iraq before 2003, and his revolutionary views make him admired by his peers. However, these same views led to his arrest and torture. His plight reflects the intellectual and political repression that afflicted the entire population, rather than just one community. Still, the novel portrays Christians as a peaceful minority, whose members are characterized by a rich cultural and intellectual heritage. The protagonist's ordeal begins when he is taken for questioning by the General Security forces: *"This was the moment I had thought about often, the one I had considered a possibility, but without enough caution to avoid it. Abu Omar took the books on the bench beside me and handed them to me. I did not ask any more questions. We walked together toward the main gate. I had always complained about the distance between it and the lecture halls and courtyard, but it seemed extremely short that morning. I liked arriving early to avoid the crowd. Not many students had arrived yet. I searched for a familiar face, perhaps someone who could record my absence. I thought of Arej and her constant warnings to me, my grandmother, her prayers, and the candles she lit daily in the church for my safety"* (Sufian Tawfiq, June 2025).

As a member of the Christian minority, Furat's personal struggle also highlights the precarious position of Christians in Iraq. The novel portrays them as a peaceful and cultured group, adding another layer to his ordeal. Furat, like many intellectuals, faces repression under the Ba'ath regime, even though he does not openly express his political views. Writers are forced to adopt cultural positions that align with the regime's agenda, glorify its authority, and serve its propaganda. This coercion often extends to dictating what writers can produce, justified by the country's state of war and crisis. This theme is highlighted in Furat's conversation with the interrogator, who states: *"You know, I look at this from a moral and political perspective, not just a literary and artistic one. Culture cannot be separated from reality. For example, we are at war; our existence and borders are threatened, and all creativity must mobilize. You cannot write about the sea or science fiction. Separating culture from reality is cowardice and reactionary"* (I'jaam 2013:48). Furat endures severe physical and psychological torture, which leaves him physically weakened and emotionally broken. The vivid description of his experience underlines the inhumanity of the regime's oppression. The corporeality of the pain of torture is vividly portrayed: *"I feel a sharp pain at the back of my head from the harsh blow I received after resisting. It worsens as he pulls my hair or sometimes pushes my head downward with his left hand, rubbing my nose into the gray fabric that reeks of a stench mixing sweat, bloodstains, and accumulated filth"* (I'jaam 2013:36). This reflects Furat's internal and external battles under the oppressive Ba'athist regime. His experiences highlight the broader plight of intellectuals and dissidents, symbolizing the silencing, dehumanization, and systemic cruelty inflicted upon those who dared to think independently.

The same corporeality of torture figures also vividly in Samuel Shimon's 2005 novel An Iraqi in Paris, where the plight of the Christian protagonist, Samuel, is portrayed as that of an Iraqi citizen irrespective of his religion. Samuel's attempt to flee to America in 2004 brought immense hardship, including detention and humiliation in Syria and Lebanon. He describes his experience in East Beirut as follows:

After an hour of walking, I was on a narrow street leading to the sea... Suddenly, I heard rocket explosions, and when I looked at the city from a distance, I saw rockets destroying some buildings. I decided to return to the hotel. At that moment, I saw a military jeep approaching, and then I saw someone extending their fist toward my face. I regained consciousness only to find myself lying in a dark room... I could hear the sea's roar as if I were in a boat... I placed my hand on my stomach, feeling the pangs of hunger... (An Iraqi in Paris 2012:17-18)

The character constantly moves between locations and capitals, from Beirut to Cyprus, Tunisia, and finally Paris, reflecting his unsettled life. Samuel's identity as an Arab in a city with large Arab communities, which often challenges personal relationships in an open society like France, further complicates his journey. This

ordeal is vividly expressed in the chapter titled Stay Away from Arabs in Paris (An Iraqi in Paris 2012). In a vast city like Paris, Samuel faces homelessness, forcing him to live on the streets without shelter, which adds to his struggle for survival (An Iraqi in Paris 2012). These facets collectively illustrate Samuel's multifaceted struggles as an Iraqi exile navigating life in foreign lands, highlighting themes of displacement, identity crisis, and the harsh realities of diaspora life.

Conclusion

Each of the analyzed novels tends to showcase a Jewish or Christian character as part of its evocation of the suffering and violence that swept Iraq after 2003. Generally, these characters are caught in an existential identity crisis. They live in a plighted social reality where pain and alienation are endured with resignation. This denial of voice re-enacts the failure of these characters to signify as citizens. This is, equivalently, a failure of a society to live up to the pluralistic ideal because of its hegemonic politics of belonging. The portrayal of Jewish and Christian characters is part of how these novels imagine the country at a specific historical moment. However, these two religious minorities signify unevenly in this process of imagining.

The depiction of Jewish characters in Iraqi novels has been stereotypically reduced to a fixed image. They are often portrayed as isolated and cautious within Iraqi society due to the repercussions of the longstanding Arab Israeli conflict, particularly since the Nakba of 1948. This stereotypical portrayal has limited Jewish characters to secondary roles in most novels. In contrast to the portrayal of Jewish characters, the presence of Christian characters in Iraqi novels has been clear and positive in most cases, with only a modest depiction of negative or villainous roles. Christian characters have often played protagonist roles in a significant number of novels.

Although some novelists tried to integrate the Christian Iraqis into the social collective, this pursuit remains less plausible because this integration seems more like a forced assimilation, as difference is categorically divisive and a source of othering for them. These novels are more realistic when they portray the Christian character as a rejected "other," suffering exclusion, marginalization, and violence under the guise of religion and blind fanaticism. This led to the migration of large numbers of Christians abroad.

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