

an iraqi rhapsody
SINAN ANTOON

Translated by Rebecca C. Johnson and Sinan Antoon
With an Introduction by Elias Khoury



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Introduction

Prison literature occupies a large space in the Arab literary scene nowadays, and it plays a dual role. On the one hand, it serves as a document of our reality, one that is besieged by dictatorships that crush humans. On the other, it is a laboratory for new literary styles, and a testimony to art's capacity to transform the resistance to death into a defense of life's powerful forces of self-renewal.

Resisting oppression through novels and poetry has become a cultural standard in post-colonial Arabic literature, and prison literature is one of its basic features. From Syria to Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt and the Arab Maghreb, prison literature has moved from the margins to become the main text, because prison itself is not a margin, but rather the dominant sociopolitical experience. Our poets and novelists have occupied a form which allows them to use the prism of prison experience to expose the massive human suffering of the Arab whose citizenship has been confiscated and who has been deprived of his/her right to liberty. Sinan Antoon's I'jaam now joins this lineage, occupying a context created by the works of Sun'allah Ibrahim, Abdilrahman Munif, Fadhil al-'Azzawi, Faraj Bayragdar and others.

I'jaam shares two basic features with most prison literature: muddled memory and writing as resistance. The prisoner conjures the past and all that exists beyond the

prison's walls in order to create hope. But the past cannot be invoked except in a disjointed context, and it is in this way that prison literature reveals the extent to which contemporary life in the Arab world is itself disjointed and without logic. Entire countries have been turned into prisons, with the Arab "patriarch" in his perpetual autumn dominating all aspects of everyday life, turning the media and all public space into a mirror to idolize and mummify the present.

The prisoner resists by recording his experience in its immediacy; it's as if the soul stripped naked by barbaric torture can only be covered with words. He writes in his journal, or dreams of writing, or lives on in order to write, certain that he will triumph over his experience by writing it. A literature which renews literature is born, a writing that triumphs over oppression with dreams of liberty.

I'jaam is a novel about writing, and the writing here has two sources: memory and nightmare, and the distance between the two is so fragile that they often mix. The world of memories confronts the reality of prison, and the war is waged inside the prisoner. This is where the novel's game originates; memory takes us to life and the prison experience throws us into death. At their intersection comes writing, so that the story may escape beyond the walls.

In this beautiful and brilliant novel, Sinan Antoon expresses the voice of those whose voices were robbed

by oppression, stressing the fact that literature can at times be the only framework to protect human experience from falling into oblivion. *I'jaam* is an honest and exciting window onto Iraq, written with both profound love and bitter sarcasm, hope and despair. It not only illuminates reality in Iraq prior to the American invasion, but also the shared human insistence on resisting oppression and injustice.

—Elias Khoury

CLASSIFIED

Ministry of the Interior Directorate of General Security Baghdad District 8241976/G 22 August, 1989

To Whom It May Concern:

The enclosed manuscript was found in a file cabinet during a general inventory, taken in preparation for the move to the new complex in al-Baladiyyat. The manuscript appears to be handwritten and without dots. A qualified personnel is hereby requested to add the dots and write a brief report of the manuscript's contents to be submitted to our department by the end of this month.

Signature

J.S.A.

cc/archives

^{*}Received 8/23/1989

T.A. designated to carry out the task.

Two clouds kissed silently in the Baghdad sky. I watched them flee westward, perhaps out of shyness, leaving me alone on the bench beneath the French palm tree (so called because it stood in the courtyard in front of the French department) to wait for Areej. I looked for something worth reading in that morning's *al-Jumhuriyya*, and found a good translation of a Neruda poem in the culture section, besieged* on all sides by doggerel barking praises of the Party and the Revolution. The breeze nudged the palm fronds above my head to applaud. It was April, "the month of fecundity, the birth of the Ba'th and the Leader," as one of the posters on the college walls announced.

"Good morning."

I longed to hear the warm, milky voice of Areej, but this was not hers. It was the voice of Abu `Umar, the security officer enrolled as a student in the English department. He wore gray pants and an open-collared shirt. Accompanying him was another of his feces†—short, long-faced, with a thick mustache. This one wore a blue safari suit, the fashion of choice for all *mukhabarat*, the secret police, regardless of season or occasion.

"Comrade Salah," said Abu `Umar, introducing the short man, elongating the final "a" of his Samarra'i accent to make it sound closer to its Tikriti variation. Abu `Umar's reddish mustache reminded me of the cock-

^{*}Beside?

[†] Species?

roaches that invaded our bathroom at night, thwarting our every eradication campaign. Like most of his colleagues, Abu `Umar never made any effort to conceal his occupation. He rarely attended classes, and his age (he was in his late thirties) was a clear sign that he wasn't an ordinary college student. In times of war, graduates were immediately conscripted, and except for graduate students who had secured special permission to continue their studies, no one could linger in college to change disciplines or get a second degree. Abu `Umar, however, transferred to the English department halfway through the academic year, after he had spent three years in the Arabic department.

"Comrade Salah would like to ask you a few questions," he said. I couldn't hide my anxiety, but I answered with an unhesitant, "Of course." Salah smiled viciously and asked me to come with him.

"Where?"

"To the office. It won't take more than half an hour."

I had thought a great deal about this moment, but could never seem to summon discretion enough to avoid it. Abu `Umar gathered the books stacked on the bench beside me and put them in my hands. We walked toward the main gate. I had always complained about the distance between the gate and the lecture halls, but that morning as we crossed the nearly empty courtyard the walk seemed mercilessly short. It was early still—I liked to

arrive before most students to avoid Baghdad's morning crowds and traffic. I looked around for a familiar face, perhaps someone to record my absence, but found none. I thought of Areej and her incessant murmurs of caution. I thought of my grandmother with her endless praying and the candles she lit in church after church for my safety.

We crossed the courtyard that separated the English department from the dean's offices, passed by the Student Union, and turned left toward the main entrance. Through the iron gate I could see a Mitsubishi with tinted windows. It was parked beneath the mural erected in honor of the Leader's honorary doctorate in disorder.* He wore a university gown and held a degree in his hand. The inscription read, "The pen and the gun have one barrel."

The Ministry of Rupture and Inflammation[‡] would daily bombard us with slogans and chants, and I retained my sanity by rearranging their words and images to better suit my mood. I began with some political songs, which could be improved with a simple stroke. In the name of the People and the Nation, I unsheathed my invisible pen and began to improve my superior's verses:

House by house
Our leader calls on us
And fucks[§] us into bed . . .

When we reached the car a man emerged from the driver's side and opened the back door. Salah motioned for me to get in. I gave Abu 'Umar a contemptuous look

^{*}Law?

[†] A saying of our great Leader, may God preserve him.

[‡] Could this be the Ministry of Culture and Information?

[§] The original lyrics read, "tucks."

and climbed onto the seat. It was clear that he would not be coming with us. Salah slammed the door shut and sat down next to me, while another man, bald with sunglasses, sat beside the driver.

The car left the college in the direction of al-Waziriyya. We passed a bookstore where I sometimes shopped, turned right at the Muhammad al-Qasim expressway, and south toward the People's Stadium. On the radio, the announcer read the morning news. A drop of sweat fell from my forehead onto the right lens of my glasses, mocking my attempt at composure. It was the first time I had felt real fear since the first days of the war, when Iranian jets thundered above Baghdad and dropped their bombs by the hundreds. The expressway ran over an old cemetery where it is said the grave of Zubayda, wife of Harun al-Rashid, lies—or perhaps another Zubayda of more recent demise. The image of the Syrian actress who played Zubayda in the television series about Harun al-Rashid imposed itself on my mind, along with the lyrics of Nazim al-Ghazali, also buried in that cemetery: "Those who threw me / those that tortured me / on a distant bridge have left me." What lies ahead for me? Sarmad was right to warn me. Did someone write a report? Did they hear me doing my impression of Him? My grandmother was right.

Please be careful, my son. For my sake. What would I do if anything happened to you? I'd die. They'll cut out your tongue. These people don't fear God. They fear nothing . . .

Salah interrupted her to answer my questions. Could he hear her, too?

"We have very much enjoyed your ideas. We'd like to hear more of them," he said with evident sarcasm. Glancing down at the cemetery as we quickly left it behind, he added, "and your famous sense of humor."

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. We, too, know things, you see," he smiled.

The car left the expressway at al-Nidal Street. I knew we were heading toward General Security. The drops of sweat began to multiply on my forehead and my heart beat with a tribe of drums running one after another. The car crossed through the empty streets of the quiet neighborhood that surrounded the security complex. We passed a young girl riding a bicycle near the Iraqi National Symphony, which I knew was close to the security complex. (I used to joke about this harmonious coincidence of Baghdad's geography.) We passed the Ta'aruf Club, owned by the Sabean minority. I would go there sometimes with one of my Sabean friends to drink beer on their terrace. The car slowed to let the girl complete her turn, and I could see her mother outside of their door, screaming and waving her arms. Salah motioned for the driver to enter through "Gate Three." After a few minutes we stopped at a tall entrance guarded by three armed men. When they recognized the car they removed that iron shark's jaw that lies in front of every government

building. As the gate opened the driver and the guards exchanged greetings, and the car began to move again.

Inside, Salah asked the driver to stop and open the trunk. The long street stretching in front of us was flanked on the left by a high wall topped with barbed wire and cameras. Salah got out of the car. I heard the sound of the trunk latching shut. He returned with a white cloth in his hands, and began to put it over my eyes. I reached out to resist, but he forced my hands down. "If you move again, I swear to God I'll crush your teeth."

I heard the scraping of the gate as it closed behind us. The last thing I saw was the Leader's face staring at me from Salah's Swiss watch. I reached up again to stop him, and felt a fierce blow at the back of my head. I don't remember what happened afterward.

I had returned to find my grandmother in front of the television, tea tray on the table. She was crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Come and see. A man from the Ministry of Interior was on the television and he said that citizens must start donating their eyes to support the war effort. He said they're using the schools as collection centers . . . They asked for money and we gave. They asked for gold and we gave. But this is just too much. May God send them all to hell! What times are we living in?"

I thought that senility had finally infiltrated her brain,

but the television announcer began to repeat the ministry's statement:

"Our great people! In your heroic battles with the Enemy you have watered the soil of this country with your precious blood. Our noble women have donated their gold to preserve our economy in its hour of need. And now our beloved nation appeals to you again to demonstrate to the Enemy your legendary bravery and boundless willingness to sacrifice . . ."

How could I have forgotten the absurd carnival our lives had become during these last years? Everything had become possible. I collapsed onto the couch beside my grandmother and picked up one of the day's newspapers. The letters of the headlines had no dots. I turned the pages and looked at the photographs. A terror struck me. The faces were eyeless. I leapt from the couch toward the door, with my grandmother's screamed warnings to "stay inside" running after me into the street.

Outside, the street signs, advertisements, and even license plates were without dots. I saw a line forming outside the middle school on our street—it had quickly been turned into an "Eye Donation Center." People were laughing and cheering, and some were even singing, "Everything you touched, our eyes kissed, the day you came, Oh great Leader . . ." The laughter and ululation grew louder. A man I didn't recognize pulled me into line. Party members in khaki uniforms recorded people's ages and eye color. I saw 'Ali, a friend from high

school, standing near the end of one of the lines. Unlike the others, he was frowning. I wanted to ask him what was happening. I called his name, but he didn't hear me. The sound of the applause rose mercilessly.

I awoke to find myself (t)here.

Papers were scattered in front of me. 'Ali! Where are you? Did you visit me in my nightmare to encourage me to write? You used to give me your journal to read, and I would labor to decipher your undotted script. To write or not to write? "Write without any concern or hesitation that the government may or may not be satisfied with what you write."* What could happen? They'll think that I have gone mad. And even if they find the papers, they won't be able to read them. My high school Arabic teacher used to complain that my handwriting looked like crab marks on sand.

I will wait.

I was sitting on my favorite bench beneath the French palm tree reading a newspaper when hesitating footsteps approached me. I looked up. It was a young man with a cigarette in his hand.

"Excuse me. Can I have a word with you?"

I knew that his name was Sarmad, and that we were

^{*}His Excellency's saying from his famous speech to the Union of Writers and Journalists.

in the same year. We shared a taxi to a soccer match once, and we argued the whole way. He was a Tayaran fan. We exchanged greetings every now and then. He spoke in a low voice:

"I know we don't know each other, but think of me as a brother. I have only one thing to say—you'd better watch out, because they're after you. They say you're arrogant and have a big mouth. They're looking for something, anything, against you and you'll be gone. So please, be careful."

I asked him who he meant by "they," but he didn't answer. I remembered I had seen him before with "comrade" Ayad from the student government.

"Please, keep this between us," he added.

"But why should you care?"

"God forgive you!" he hissed. "Some of us still have a conscience!"

"Sorry, it's just a bit unusual."

"Just consider it an act of charity. I have to go. Good luck, and please take care."

Sarmad roused me from my recklessness. I decided from that day to be more careful. What good would my disappearance into their labyrinth do? That night, when I told my grandmother about the incident she doubled her usual dose of panicked warnings:

"Didn't I tell you to watch out? These people don't even fear God. Why meddle in politics, my son? What will you get except trouble? You know I'd die if you were hurt in any way. Isn't it enough that I lost your father and mother—you want to abandon me too? They'll cut out your tongue. And what will you get? God and the Virgin Mary protect you. I light candles in church every day for you, but you never listen."

"Don't worry, Grandma. Nothing will happen."

"Don't worry? How can I not worry? Don't you remember the story about the child who told a joke he'd heard at home, and how his kindergarten teacher wrote a report and had the child's father put in prison? That was in kindergarten. Just imagine how many like her they have in colleges. When will you come to your senses? And why are you so upset at the government, anyway? You don't even have to serve in the army. You're better off than all those men who have to fight and die in the war."

I reminded her that my exemption from military service was due to a benign tumor in the right side of my brain, and not the beneficence of the government. But she continued to chastise me until I promised her I would be more careful. I promised myself I would try.

I woke up to find myself (t)here.

Baghdad's July is sadistic. The sun's rays lash the backs of its inhabitants, burning into their pores to roil every cell. Perhaps this is why all of our "revolutions" choose July as their month to demonstrate their accomplishments. We have been taught to call these frequent events "revolutions," when they are actually scars on our history. A bunch of sadists get sunstroke and declare themselves saviors. Then they begin to torture people and ride them like mules, especially after they discover that this is easier, and perhaps more pleasurable, than fulfilling their promises. Later, another group will come along to depose the first, bringing with them longer whips and chains of a more economic metal. A sadistic circle forever strangling us. A political scientist would probably have little trouble disproving my theory, but in this heat and misery it appears, at least to me, a sound one.

To live here means to piss away* three quarters of your life waiting. Waiting for things that rarely come: Revolution, the bus, a lover, Godot... and waiting so long that you drown in time, because time itself is a fugitive citizen, trembling with fear and stumbling on the sidewalk, only to be pissed and spat upon by a merciless History. I felt a cool breeze when I remembered that Falah would be on his way. Or perhaps diabetes was no longer considered sufficient grounds for exemption from military service. We were comrades in illness and soccer mania, and shared a love for the arts. Falah was a talented painter, but his work suffered from one inexorable fault that prevented him from staging an exhibit: he refused to include a portrait of the Leader in his portfolio. Even established painters, who could afford to

^{*}Pass?

ignore this unspoken rule, were called on from time to time to express their gratitude in newspaper or television interviews for the limitless support given to Iraqi fine arts by the Ultimate Artist.

It was our third day at the Ministry of Defense's "Special Committee" for reexamination. The experts and military physicians on this committee, handpicked by the Leader himself, were to subject all those previously exempted from military service to renewed scrutiny. It was said that those exempted for reason of obesity would be filmed to allow Him himself to render the final decision. And there would be no exemptions made this time for those citizens with "connections," who had previously been declared unfit even though they were as healthy as racehorses. Much was made of the unwavering justice of this new committee, but I still could not imagine relatives of important officials fighting on the frontlines, even if they were found to be fit. They would most likely be assigned to an administrative unit in their hometown and struggle to show up once a month in order to avoid embarrassing their commanding officer.

The first two days, we waited for hours only to be rewarded with the most common sentence in bureaucratic parlance: come back tomorrow. It reminded me of a cartoon I had clipped from *Alif Ba'* magazine and hung on my bedroom wall (as well as the wall of my memory): a government employee sits behind a desk like an emperor, and in front of him stands a poor citizen,

fatigued after a long day in search of signatures and stamps. The citizen, out of breath and dripping sweat, needs just one more signature to finish his task, but the bureaucrat tells him, "Come back tomorrow so I can tell you to come back tomorrow."

I sought shelter from the tyranny of the sun in the slender shade of a palm tree standing across the street from the Ministry building. The sun, it seemed, had allied itself with the status quo against us and beat down its midday heat. Why had the Ministry of Defense chosen this quiet residential neighborhood for its offices? It was a dismal scene. Flocks of men lined up to enter the building, some leaning on a cane and others on a daughter, or son, or wife. Most of them carried envelopes, mostly likely concealing X-rays or medical records, despite the fact that we had been instructed not to bring such documentation. The committee had decided that it would recognize no previous diagnosis and would instead rely solely on its own "evidence." Quick-thinking entrepreneurs had availed themselves of this opportunity and began to sell sandwiches and soft drinks to those standing in line. After only a few minutes (we said we would keep our appointment on "English time"), Falah appeared across the street. I said goodbye to the gentle tree and walked toward him.

We entered the gate and turned right, stopping in front of a soldier who was preparing to read a list of names. There was a group of about fifty men waiting—standing,

as they offered no benches or chairs, despite the fact that we were all considered "damaged" in some way. Perhaps keeping us standing under the burning sun was a new treatment developed by the Ministry of Defense? Falah and I squatted against a wall.

The soldier stood at the top of a concrete staircase leading to the entrance of the building. He read his list in a steady monotone. When we heard our names, we were to call out "yes" or "here" or "present"—anything to prove our existence at that particular moment. Falah found a pebble on the ground and began to draw something in the dust between his feet. A man in his forties approached me, wearing the thickest glasses I had ever seen, and asked the time. It was almost noon.

"A watch is an instrument for measuring lost time," I said to Falah, as if I had just made a discovery that would benefit mankind.

"That's a good first line for a story," he said.

As one name followed another, some of the men began to chat; others asked the soldier to reread a name. The rising babble no doubt offended the sensitive ears of the soldier, as he stopped reading the names and stared at us long enough to silence the entire crowd. Then a lecture began in a thick Tikriti accent:

"Look, I'm sick of this shit. You're not children. If you hear your name, say 'yes.' And stand in line. This isn't a coffeehouse or a Turkish bath. I don't want hear any bullshit. Get it? Or are you too deaf and stupid to under-

stand? Look, those who do get it can explain it to the others. I'm going to read these names and if I hear any of you say one word I'll stamp your military service booklet right now and have you transferred to the front-lines within forty-eight hours. My commanding officer will be more than happy to get rid of you sick bastards. And if you want to complain, go ahead. My name is Hasan; I dare you to file a complaint."

He sighed and went back to his list, trying to find the last name he had read. I looked at Falah, who smiled sarcastically and nodded his head silently. The man in the thick glasses mumbled something I couldn't make out. The frustration of the crowd was visible in their tired eyes. But who would say anything? Falah's name was called, and he stood.

"Wait for me?"

"Yeah, I'll be in front."

"Zayn. See you soon."

He joined the others in a long line. The officer called three more names before he led the group into the building. After a few minutes more he came back out and began reading names from a new sheet. My name was on the third list. I stood in the line and entered the door.

When I was eighteen, I reported for my first examination at the military conscription center. At the time, it was carried out by one military physician and took only ten minutes. Now it's different. The soldier ordered us to

remove our clothes to our undergarments, divided us into groups of five, and directed us to sit on the benches that lined the long hallway leading to the examination room. We were to enter the examination room, stand silently in front of the committee, and speak only when asked a question. A soldier stood on either side of the hallway, and a third at the door to the room. I took off my clothes and spent about ten minutes sitting on the bench, enjoying the cool streams that flowed from the committee's air conditioners. I began to contemplate the possibility of conscription, but before I could fully rehearse the anxiety that followed that thought, I heard my name called. I walked toward the room, and the soldier at the door told me to stop. I watched another young man leave the room, and heard the order to enter. Three men in white coats sat behind a wide table, and the Leader observed the proceedings from a photo above their heads. Below his portrait read an inscription written in angular, Kufic script: "The sweat shed in training lessens the blood shed in battle."* Another man stood in the middle of the room to my left. He looked younger than the other three, who were probably all in their fifties. After they had read the forms in front of them, one asked me to extend my arms. My right arm appeared normal and strong, while my left, weak because of a benign tumor that was found in my brain when I was twelve, drooped like a withering branch.

"Walk forward a little," said the one in the middle. I hoped they would notice my slight limp, which was

^{*}A saying of our venerable Leader, may God preserve him.

more pronounced that day because of the whisky Falah and I had drunk the night before. I had walked to within a meter of the table when he stopped me and said, "Enough. Turn and walk back to where you were standing." They each began to write on their papers and the one in the middle told me to leave.

"And the verdict?" I asked.

"It will appear on your military service booklet at your conscription center."

I left the room and dressed quickly. The soldier at the door pointed the way out. I breathed a sigh of relief, despite the disappointment of the postponed decision. Falah was waiting outside. They had asked him about his daily insulin injections and demanded to see their marks. We visited the conscription center in eastern Karada four times during the following month before we received the results; we had been declared "unfit for military service." The committee, it seems, had introduced new vocabulary—before, we were considered "exempt." Damaged goods in times of war.

These words recorded in our booklets didn't quite overwhelm us with joy, but it did spread a tranquil comfort over us to know that our death might be postponed until the next committee, or the next war. We celebrated by going to *Mansur Mansur*, our favorite bar. It was on Sadoun Street, next to the Iranian Airlines office that had been vandalized during the first days of the war in 1980; it was burned and now served as an impromptu toilet for

drunken passersby. We drank a toast to disability and listened to Umm Kulthum sing "Forgetfulness is Bliss." That day we sat next to an old man—a permanent fixture in the bar. According to the waiter, he came in every day at three and sat alone at the corner table with his only son's photograph in front of him. The son had been missing in action for four years. The old man would sit and drink, bottles crowding around the photograph, while he wailed and called out his son's name: Salam . . . Salam . . .

I went home. My grandmother had prepared the tea for our regular afternoon chat. She began to narrate the events of her day:

"You should have seen what happened in church today. They brought in the body of this young man, a soldier, so handsome. Like the moon! And his father had gone mad, just mad. He was dancing and singing, 'My son's not dead. He's not dead.' Poor thing. He was an engineer and left two children behind. His wife was there, too. She was tearing out her hair. How they cried! And his father danced and cried like a woman."

I asked her about this sudden change in religious atmosphere: "Since when do they play music in church?"

"Not inside! They were outside, next to the door. Whenever they bring in a soldier a group of those Party members come and play music. Why don't you come to church once in while if you want to know what goes on there? One like you, no religion . . ."