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Writing in a Country at War

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Panel: Writing in a Country at War. What are a writer's duties, privileges and obligations when his or her country is at war?

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Writing in a Country at War

By Sadeq R. Mohammed (Iraq)

Perhaps, I should begin by informing the honorable audience that I am from a country and a people that have wars that come in all sizes, types, shapes and colors. We have short wars and we have long wars. We have fat wars and we have slim wars. We have black wars and we have white wars. We have shaved wars and we have bearded wars. We have dirty wars and we have clean wars. We have sexy wars and we have unsexy wars. We have Latino wars and we have Asian wars. We have Iranian wars, Kuwaiti wars and American wars. We have conventional wars and we have high-tech wars. We have holy wars and we have unholy wars. We have symmetrical wars and we have asymmetrical wars. We have biological wars and we have chemical wars. We have the Saddam wars and we have the Bush wars. We have the mother of all wars and we have the father of all wars. We had the first war and, probably, we will have the last war. We've even had a war sitting on our heads like Kim Kardashian's butt for the last eleven years. Our killers work 24/7 from Basra to Mosul and from Falluja to Baghdad. Their latest exhibition was held on Mount Sinjar where captive women were sold by ISIS in Mosul's local markets. For further details please see the map of a country called Iraq or simply visit a non-existent website at www.iraq.bullet. [Note: all our w's stand for war]

Writing is a very complicated process and writing in a war zone is the most complicated process of all. Various schools of criticism informed us that writing is very much conditioned by its circumstances and environment. If this assumption is true, it is certainly very true of writing in a war-ravaged zone. However, one must not forget that the nature of war differs from one to another. Accordingly, the conditions of writing, by necessity, differ too. Writing in trenches, in a conventional type of war, is certainly different from writing in a high-tech modern war or, for that matter, writing in civil, militia or terrorist war. Writing in the red zone, the less fortified part of Baghdad where I live and work, is one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. The enemy is always an invisible fanatic who is bent on murdering and maiming as many innocent people as possible with all manner of light weapons, and, of course, suicide bombers. Last year a suicide bomber killed and injured more than 90 of my students as they were reading for their final exams in a mosque near the university. Last January, as I was telling a bed time story to my four-year-old daughter, an attack on a nearby juvenile prison turned our tiny neighborhood into a battleground between security forces and terrorists. Last winter, an unidentified person planted a bomb in my country house in the al-Nahrawan suburb of Baghdad. I only survived because I had stopped to buy cigarettes.

WRITING IN A COUNTRY AT WAR

Streets are punctuated by thousands of checkpoints made of steel, concrete and iron. The streets are also filled with the jarring sounds of sirens and the horns of military convoys. The traffic may be stopped for any reason and you may find yourself trapped in a wasteland of meaningless existence. In this red zone, it is especially dangerous for writers such as journalists, translators, academics and poets. And of course, it is absolutely dangerous if you are all these four in one, like me. In the beginning, when you realize the dangers that surround you as a writer, all you desire is anonymity and invisibility because you know that hundreds of the country's writers have been kidnapped, captured or killed. War becomes a way of life and writing becomes a threat that might reveal your camouflage. However, slowly but surely, war wittingly or unwittingly infiltrates all aspects of writing and turns it into a war tactic. Thus, a writer may speak of:

1. Reconnoitering the world of experience.
2. Ambushing imagination.
3. A tactical formation of resources.
4. Phasing the text and/or the writing process.
5. Coding or encrypting the message.
6. Jamming readers' radars
7. Leapfrogging readers to obtain a favorable creative position.
8. Capturing the readership's imagination.

A text is a porous entity. The osmosis that exists between the real world and a text enables war to find a habitat in the text and refashion its fabric according to its own law. War has become not only a theme but a technique. Thus:

1. Poems become saturated with the lexicon of war. Here is but a sample of the type of diction employed in poems written by some of my colleagues: "blood, shrapnel, uniforms, bombs, bullets, wounds, truce, helmets, berets, graves, shelters, trenches, etc.
2. Sudden ends, sudden beginnings and the illogical organization of the various parts of the poem [the order of chaos]
3. Anger [the ranting, the cursing, the use of the profane]
4. Rhythm of war : "the list, observation post, reconnaissance"
5. Poetry as code

WRITING IN A COUNTRY AT WAR

6. The presence of the erotic in the midst of the chaotic
7. Poetry as an SOS message
8. Destruction of language
9. Poetry as a message in a bottle for future generations
10. Publication exposes poets and makes them vulnerable