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Algurabaa (The Strangers)

M. Neelika Jayawardane on

Sama Al Shaibi & Dena Al-Adeeb

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Sama Alshaibi and Dena Al-Adeeb grew up learning about the gains and losses that a complex national history imprints upon – and imparts into – the intimacy of one’s body. Alshaibi, born in Basra, Iraq, to a Palestinian mother and an Iraqi father, had to abandon home when her father was blacklisted by the Ba’ath Party; Al-Adeeb’s family was forced to leave Baghdad for Kuwait just before the Iran/Iraq war – thereafter, they relocated to the US when Iraq invaded Kuwait. What followed, for both women, were many years of instability: the displacements that accompany the disruptions of war, and subsequent vilification of one’s homeland and people marking their everyday experiences. In a world in which one’s identity is dependent on nation and origins, the personalised nametags on our passports a beacon of belonging or otherness, they were markedly “unfashionable” travellers, privileged with neither the solidity of Home, nor the power of return.

In the “west”, the image of the traveller comes to us via Flaubert, Thesiger, and Hemingway. We typically associate this Privileged Wanderer with a white, male figure originating from a powerful empire located in the west: a man mobile throughout the arena of his empire’s power, and even beyond the specific borders of his empire. The Global Cosmopolitan of the 21st century – the much heralded Netizen – arrives in our collective imaginary in a modernised version of those 20th century travel writers: white, western, kitted with the latest gear that marks her/him as mobile: the inevitable Patagonia wear, the Nikes, and the Blackberry/iPhone. Branded by their collection of “authentic” labels, we mark such figures as powerful bodies that have explicit “right” to be mobile. Anything outside of that bona-fide image – in nations exhorted to be vigilant for threatening Others – triggers alarm.

Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb draw attention to the far more complex interactions between subject and empire, to displacements and mobility that, in fact, simultaneously immobilise and re-locate. Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb’s ‘Othered’ versions of the traveller confound and confuse our standard expectations, creating spaces for contemplation and more complex Conversations. The solipsistic trajectories within their images and films present a counternarrative to the usual story written by the classic (western) travel writer: they provide a space within which we can reflect on our terror of the “Global Nomad” – particularly in the form of the Global Muslim – in an age that has come to ceremoniously glorify plurality, mobility and transnationalism for the select, and unceremoniously circumscribe certain Dark Others.

Modern empirical nature is deeply dependent on 19th century taxonomy – based on complex configurations linking visual markers, specific geopolitical locations, language, and religion to the bodies on which specific physical markers are attached – to classify, circumscribe, and immobilise the “troubling” subjects created by colonial ventures. The United States, like the former British Empire, has had a historical penchant for classifying and sorting people using particular physical markers as signs of criminality or danger, potential for loyalty or betrayal; it a system that functions upon the ability to divide friend from foe, national hero from terrorist, ‘Authentic’ from ‘Fake’.

However, invasions and wars necessary for the creation of any empire displace people from their “homed” locations, creating “unsettled” bodies whose physical (and metaphysical) unclassifiability is troubling; these ambiguous Others embody all that empire fears: they are often enough like “us” to be able to pass, but

not like “us” enough in order to expect total allegiance. Edward Said’s fearsome/alluring Orientals – inclusive of everything from the blonde Lebanese to the long-limbed Sudanese – carry all the ambiguous physical markers that alarm empire. The Saidian Oriental presents, for the censorious west, trickster versions of the global cosmopolitan: their ambiguous physicality signifying manifold categories, allowing those originating from the multiplicitous Arab world to “pass” between ethnic groups, as long as the specifics on their passports display names matching the “desirable” ethnic group of the moment. As “Others” who cannot be categorised into neatly organisable, controllable groups, the west cannot, easily, locate them as Friends (allies/non-Muslims/rare Muslim friend) or as Foes (terrorists, Muslims).

Those mobilised by the United States’ new Wars on Terror thus give rise to its greatest fears: these new foes may carry physical markers that allow them to pass into Empire without being detected. In order to counteract that fear invasion, the US populace is continually educated to remain hypervigilant for signs of Terror, on alert for those who are Not Quite White/Not Quite Christian. In “Discourses of War, Geographies of Abjection: Reading Contemporary American Ideologies of Terror”, Francois Debrix contends that after the events on September 11, 2001, ideologies espoused and publicised by key American ‘masters of stagecraft’ helped create an atmosphere of intense confusion, leading to the adoption of a “geopolitics of abjection” (here, Debrix relies on Julia Kristeva’s conceptualisations in her theory of abjection) in which US citizens violently rejected the “unthinkable and the intolerable” in their “search for meaning” (Debrix 1158-1159). Within this abject state, the population “fixat[ed] on a threat, a risk, a horror, or a terror

that seems to ‘emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside’”: it is a terror that “must be ‘ejected beyond the tolerable of the thinkable’” (1158).

This “terrorised” location is a state in which many in the US (as well as other locations of geopolitical Unrest) actually find comfort, finding “the meaningful through the incomprehensible, the irrational, the non-human and the terror/horror that the lack of meaning often provokes” (Debrix 1158), justifying one’s own nation’s own foray into using the methodologies of terror. Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb, who exist within a political, intellectual, and emotional space that rarely allows a more rational response, reflect on our (irrational) rationales for adopting, embracing, and celebrating that state of abjection.

In such Unrestful nations, those ambiguous others who exist on the margins of what is defined as ‘Authentic’ must find ways of negotiating a location for themselves – especially during political moments in which it is expedient to publicise them as a threat and regulate their movements. Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb’s work highlights the effects of such measures, and reflects on the intricate ceremonies that those deemed to be “inauthentic” must perform as they attempt find a way to negotiate life outside their ‘homespaces’. Like other “peripatetic peoples” occupying a “peripatetic niche[s]” similar to that of gypsies (Berland and Salo, qt. in Bogue, 2004: 172), who occupy a similarly ambiguous relationship with settled communities, Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb illustrate that life as modern nomads can be both “compromising and accommodating” in some instances, and “transgressive” in others (Bogue, 2004: 176). In Alshaibi and Aladeeb’s work, the traveller moves through psychological, intellectual, and geographical terrain, creating a location for us to reflect upon the complex and often debilitating



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effects of displacement and relocation. The psychologically complex female figures in Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb's images and films are inversions/conversions of that powerfully mobile cosmopolitan, confounding and confusing our expectations of the mythological traveller.

The work included in *Baghdadi mem/Wars* in a three suite series of video and photography, title *Still/Cheos. Efface/Remain and Absence/Presence*. Each suite is as complex as the political landscapes and migratory trajectories Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb's lives have followed. Their artwork reflects upon displacement and the multifaceted turns that returns take – those complicated psychological returns we make to

all that is beloved in our memory, when physical body is forbidden to go back to locations of love. The images and short films, chronicling the intensity with which the individual body absorbs and reacts to violent colonial encounters, are a commentary that gives dignity to those erased by map-making and territorial wars. Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb's collaborative work is theatre: the images and short films are staged in a manner that invites the intellectual and emotional participation of the viewer, allowing us to absorb the amniotic fluid of disruption and displacement, defiance and hope.

For any immigrant or exile, the brocades of the narratives of loss are embroidered in richer

hues: the lights of the cities we left behind blink brighter, daily activities in which one can no longer indulge take on a heroic scope. The things we hold carefully within our memorialised spaces are paradoxes of absence and presence, being simultaneously lost to us, and present in the mythological proportions that our longing creates. Performing the madness of that contradiction – one that has physical and psychological repercussions – is not simply an act that acknowledges the material dimensions of loss. These performances are also acts of resistance – feats of defiance against the effacements engineered by conquest. As Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb present their complex responses to such efforts at erasure – coloured as they are by the multiplicitous incongruities that loss imprints upon each individual's body – they invite the participation of the viewer. We, as co-meaning makers, are compelled to enter the theatrical spaces that they fashion with the deep level of compassion necessary for understanding the experiences of the Other.

In the performances, Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb's bodies, and the psychological terrain they conceptualise, are stained and strained by the materiality of loss, and the pressures that shaped their transitory lives. The conceptual premise of *Baghdadi Mem/Wars* is rooted in the corporal intellectual and emotional embodiment of war and displacement of the two Iraqi Artists, painting the landscape of the video and stills with an intensely personal experience of annihilation. The first of the suites, *Still/Chaos*, is itself composed of three scenes. The first scene contains a white-walled room in the process of collapsing inward: within this room are Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb. At first, their bodies are separated – detached, aloof, hanging on the padded space, mirroring each other's motions.

As the walls collapse, they are forced to interact with each other; but we see, by the third scene, that each body reacts differently to entrapment and enclosure: while Al-Adeeb's reaction is to fight, pushing at the enclosing walls, Alshaibi's response is to collapse into herself, finding a semblance of safety within the curve of her companion's body.

Al-Adeeb finds, upon reflecting on the process of creating the scenes, that they initially “thought it was going to be more performative....

I thought I'd be a 'character'. But in the actual space, [our movements] became more subtle, slow, very still. We thought we'd create a tension for the audience – for instance, there is a way to read it as a scene in which we are both there [both women exist in the space], and another way to read it in which one [of the bodies] acts as a 'double' for the other – you can read it [as a scene in which] we are both experiencing illusions.”

In the first of the triptych of scenes, we can see that both bodies within the enclosing walls are performative, and that both have held on to the experience of repression – but we also see, through subtle movements, that they express entirely different responses to the terror that arrives when one's options for survival dwindle. We, as viewer-participants, comprehend that our bodies hold on to fear differently, and that our emotional responses will be manifested in distinct ways. Al-Adeeb states that for those persons who have lived (or continue to exist) within an experience of enclosure, the rest of their lives will be an expression of this experience.

In the second of the three suites, *Efface/Remain*, we see a large, blank blackboard, and a hand engaged in the sublime act of remembering beauty: the text being recorded is a poem, *Algurabaa*, by the most prominent female Iraqi artist, Nazek al-Malaika. The lines on the blackboard state: “Time is passing / and the silence is like the mood of winter.”

Alshaibi emphasises that “it becomes an obsessive compulsion to write, to record, archive” what happens when one’s history, and the record of one’s people’s existence is being erased. She and Al-Adeeb wanted to capture both the compulsion to record and the imperial machinery’s drive to erase the history of the civilisation that is being conquered. They also wanted to comment about the more insidious forgetting that happens within any civilisation under attack – the loss of cultural memory in the face of the pressures of day-to-day survival.

“*Algurabaa*’ means the strangers, foreigners, exiles, all those things,” explains Alshaibi; “The relationship [between the words] parallels, or tries to draw [a correlation] between exile and emptiness, and evoke the space that exists between silence and winter.” As one hand writes the poetic lines describing the aloneness of winter – and of exile – we also see another hand coming in and beginning to erase the original writing. The second hand then begins to scribble over the words of the first. For Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb, the tension between remembering and forgetting is both external and internal: “Outside forces compel us to document and archive, but there is also this tension within us – we know that we are losing something. We need to do this in order to remain centred, and to know that we are not losing our connection to this thing we had to leave behind. We have

to leave our own commentary for the outside world that dismisses us or relegates us to the margins; for the inner self – to know that you are not being erased or dismissed; and for the next generation.”

In this second suite, when the figure returns, she finds that the board is wiped clean. As viewers, we may think at this point: ah, so the person doing the erasure was successful... what is the point of all this trying? But then we see that the hand begins, simply, to write once again: an attempt at erasure does not have to be a defeat. Uprooted, without any location providing a secure home, Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb found that they needed to assert a new language to map out the territory of a third space – one in which the body might fashion a space that allows for multiplicity. Some may critique their work and reality as “removed” or esoteric in its content, since it is – on the surface – distant from the typical “guns and destruction” that one may, more typically, see in artwork from war-zones. However, neither artist has ever felt “removed” from the experience of war; they have, instead, carried the memories with them in their complicated trajectories out of Iraq. Rather than being “removed”, Al-Adeeb finds that she is, in fact, “living multiple experiences...it’s important to recognise that it’s not just the artists who are there, located in the war zone, who can express the war or loss. Ours just has a different expression,” because it is an experience that has another dimension of loss – one that is, in fact, enacted within the last suite of Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb’s collaborative work: *Absence/Presence*. In this last scenario, we see two figures, encased within a vast loneliness, the inhospitable nature of the stark landscape engulfing the two bodies within emptiness. This is the transit lounge of departure, resplendent with grief, longing, and hope.

Into this empty, bleached space, Al-Adeeb enters first; Alshaibi enters from the far left, and fills a vessel with water. She walks across to the closest right, then empties the bucket's contents after Al-Adeeb's departing figure: it is a ceremonial gesture that Iraqis recognise as one that contains the hope of return. Sama's last memory of Iraq: that of the nanny who had helped raise her, throwing a bucket of water after their car as her family departed, never to return to that space as an intact family again. Her mother, who now lives in Colorado, within the spine of mountains traversing down the middle of the American west, still throws out a bucket of water when Sama drives away.

As I conversed with Dena and Sama, I was reminded of the veteran South African photographer, David Goldblatt, who is similarly concerned with revealing the intimacy of bodies and conversations that survive in the interstices between national discourse and the newsreel. Throughout his 60+ year career, he, too, stepped aside from engaging in representing monumental history, leaving the grand narratives of wins and losses for those photographers who record the heroic narratives of nations. Instead, his images confirm the ordinary struggle of the woman who grew cabbages for her family in the back of her tin shack – while another image verifies the unwitting privileges bestowed upon a group of teenagers enjoying a Sunday afternoon of flirtation by the poolside. These, too, are political images, recording the violence of a divided, split nation.

Though both Dena and Sama have lived through the spectacular violence to which images of war often refer, Al-Adeeb is resolved not to privilege – nor give into the pressure to produce – work that splashes “bullets and blood” on the viewer.

Alshaibi, too, finds that for artists who have experienced war and want to speak about their experiences through their work, there is a strange one-upmanship where one wins by favouring graphic and violent images. She does not, however, blame those who feel the need to show the destruction: when we are so outraged by the destruction and erasure of all that is beloved, we may find that the hyperrealism evoked by brutality is the most effective. But Alshaibi concludes that “the devastation of a home or the rubble does not show what's necessary for survival within these moments... [instead] it's all these fissures that are left in a devastated building that's still standing” that she finds important to explore.

Sama and Dena's work deals with the body – the female body in particular. The narratives in which we participate are constructed around the narration of a split self – as artists, they do not attempt to construct a false sense of wholeness. Having lived in the location of war, as well as within the Diaspora, both artists have a unique, multi-layered understanding of identity – an understanding that continues to shift, shaping itself according to external forces, as well as internal, psychological limitations and growth processes. Alshaibi and Al-Adeeb lived the experience of displacement and loss, but differently from those who remained within the location of war, as both had families that moved to the United States. However, their understanding of life is significantly different from the experiences of people whose home has always been in the United States. Their having found “safety” in the US – the very nation engaged in erasing the individual and collective identities of Iraqis under sweeping military and propaganda violence – and the fragmentation that resulted from living with

such contradictions, is an ongoing conversation that continues to be the subject of their artwork.

Immigrants to the United States soon find that its offer of freedom is encased within inconsistencies that are an essential part of militarily powerful nations. In the last suite, the departing figure becomes very small: so small that it threatens to disappear. The horizon towards which the figure disappears: we know that it may be as restrictive as a place in which the walls are self-evident. Like the freedom offered by the political and social landscape of “America,” it is this very openness – the lack of walls or enclosures – that exposes an immigrant’s vulnerability. Here, in this vast openness, her disappearing figure is cast out into liberty.

Works Cited

Bogue, Ronald, 2004, *Apology*



Tight cubemid