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Memory, National Identity Formation, and (Neo)Colonialism in Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad*

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Abstract: According to Ernest Renan, a nation is formed by its collective memory; it is a country's shared experiences which enable it to become (in Benedict Anderson's much later coinage) an "imagined community." Building on these ideas, commentators such as Kavita Singh and Lianne McTavish et al. have shown how museums play a key role in helping nations to form an identity and understand their past. However, as these critics and those from other disciplines (including postcolonial studies) have noted, museums can also reflect and reinforce the unequal power dynamics between nations which result from colonialism and neocolonialism. This article demonstrates that these ideas are directly relevant to the 2019 play *A Museum in Baghdad* by the Palestinian-Irish playwright Hannah Khalil. This play is set in the Museum of Iraq in three different time periods: "*Then (1926), Now (2006), and Later*" (an unspecified future date) (3). Khalil uses specific characters – most notably, Gertrude Bell during the "Then" sections, the Iraqi archaeologists Ghalia and Layla during the "Now" sections, and a "timeless" character called Nasiya who appears across the time periods – to question the degree to which the museum is perpetuating Western views of Iraq.

Keywords: museum, collective memory, national identity, colonialism, Hannah Khalil, *A Museum in Baghdad*

Introduction

In an article entitled "The Museum is National," Kavita Singh claims that "Along with the national anthem, the national emblem, [and] the national festival, a na-

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tion needs its national library, its national archive, and its national museum" (176). Undoubtedly, museums are not only spaces for preservation but also centres for education and spaces in which the "ritual of citizenship" (Sodaro 79) is played out. For Ivan Karp, museums are important public spaces for the establishing and fostering of identities for both local communities and nations (Sodaro 79). Moreover, museums are the stores in which our social, civic, and national identities are preserved, displayed, and shaped; they are the gatekeepers to our history (Huyssen 16). In other words, museums are the places whose artefacts mirror and testify to a people's existence. Recently, "Richly detailed histories of specific institutions have been supplemented by broader studies of the museum's role in society, often with a strong Foucauldian focus on discipline and power" (Alberti 559). For example, Lianne McTavish et al. have highlighted "the powerful role" that museums have always played "in reinforcing class distinctions, creating narratives of national identity, and glorifying colonial attempts to subjugate Indigenous peoples" while also acknowledging "more recent," progressive efforts by museums to "foster the active contributions of visitors, promote varying modes of intercultural exchange, and enable affective encounters with memory" (223).

The 2019 play *A Museum in Baghdad* by the Palestinian-Irish playwright Hannah Khalil is centrally concerned with how museums reflect a country's sense of its past and itself and how they can easily reflect and reinforce the unequal power dynamics between nations which result from colonialism and neocolonialism. The play, which was co-commissioned by the Royal Lyceum Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and which premiered at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon,[1] is set in the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in three different time periods. These are described in the published play text as "*Then (1926), Now (2006), and Later*" (an unspecified future date) (3). Intriguingly, these time periods sometimes "exist" simultaneously on stage. The action is also occasionally punctuated by "chorus" sequences, in which two or more members of the company suddenly comment on the action in a detached way, in a mixture of English and Arabic. Sometimes these "chorus" moments are extended poetic set pieces comprised of several lines of dialogue and at other times they are one-line interjections, in which the members of the suddenly-convened "chorus" comment quickly on something a character has just said or done.

Khalil's choice of time periods is carefully considered. 1926 is a time when the British still rule over Iraq thanks to their post-Great War mandate, and when one of the play's main characters – celebrated English travel writer, archaeologist,

1 The production was meant to transfer to London's Kiln Theatre in April 2020, but this never happened, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

and colonial administrator Gertrude Bell (who helped the British draw the borders of the newly-created polity "Iraq") – is trying to open a museum that will unite Iraqis around their rich, shared, Babylonian/Assyrian/Arabic past. 2006 marks the time when the museum and its Iraqi staff are first attempting to reopen in the wake of the famous 2003 looting, which – as the play makes clear – took place under the indifferent eyes of the US military. The third time period, which features aged versions of characters from the "Now" sections of the play but which could also be, according to the play text, "*50, 100, or 1,000 years in the future*" (3), is used by Khalil to suggest that the damage caused to Iraq by previous invaders – whether British, American, or, further back, Ottoman, Mongol, Arabic, Persian, etc. – has created a cycle of violence and unrest that will continue to plague the country (and the museum attempting to display its history and identity) for many years to come.

As is already clear, Khalil's play explores the complex interplay between museums, national identity formation, and colonialism/neocolonialism. This article will demonstrate how Khalil uses specific characters – most notably, Gertrude during the "Then" sections, the Iraqi archaeologists Ghalia and Layla during the "Now" sections, and a "*timeless*" (2) character called Nasiya during a key scene in which the time periods overlap – to question the degree to which the museum is perpetuating Western views of Iraq and even deepening the West's influence over Iraq. The fact that Iraqi rulers (whether the British-backed King Faisal in 1926 or the American-backed Iraqi government ministers in 2006) are complicit in keeping humble, everyday Iraqis out of the museum for the openings deeply troubles Gertrude, Ghalia, and Layla. By contrast, Nasiya is negative about the very existence of the museum, which she describes as "all vanity" (79), and disrupts the 1926 and 2006 openings by seizing a valuable crown, crushing it in her hands, throwing it to the floor, and yelling about the sufferings of the Iraqi people. Gertrude, Ghalia, and Layla each firmly believe that if the museum does not appeal to and speak to *all* Iraqis, it has no practical use. If it is too Western in its set-up and in how it presents the artefacts (that is, if it presents them with the detachment of the West's "Orientalist" bias and "anthropological gaze") (McTavish 71–104; Kreps), it will fail in its purpose of inspiring Iraqis and uniting them around a shared sense of their actual, glorious past. Likewise, if the museum is as rigorously authentic as the directors can make it but lower-class Iraqis are discouraged or even prevented from entering it, it will also fail. Quite simply, it will not be accessible to the people who are meant to learn about themselves and their country from it.

The directors of the museum – "Arabophile" Gertrude during the "Then" sections and Ghalia during the "Now" sections – may have great intentions based on their desire to thoroughly understand and help all Iraqis. However, as Khalil

shows, their efforts will always be fatally undermined by three factors. The first is that Western and Western-backed politicians, for all of the lip service they pay to the museum, will always choose maintaining firm control over Iraq ahead of culture and the betterment of the Iraqi people. Second, the museum directors will always find it hard to escape the degree to which they themselves have been significantly "Westernised" by the years they spent away from Iraq and the Arab world. In Gertrude's case, this means her formative years in England and her time in France during the First World War; in Ghalia's case, it is all the years she spent living in England and France due to political upheavals in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The third and final factor – and the one explored in the next section – is the degree to which Iraq itself might be built on a flawed foundation: that is, the suspicion that it might be incapable of cohering as a nation, thanks to fundamental errors made by Gertrude and others on behalf of the British Empire and exacerbated by the interference of invading Americans, who during the late twentieth and early 21st centuries have stirred up local and sectarian tensions that they do not properly understand.

Museums, Memory, and National Identity Formation

According to Ernest Renan, in his classic essay "What is a Nation?", the unifying essence of a nation is "a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound implications of history" (18), which is – in many ways – embodied by museums. This spiritual principle is closely attached to national memory and national identity. While noting the importance that commentators have historically placed on geographic borders, religion, race, language, and dynastic roots, Renan asserts that a nation is actually formed by its memory.[2] For Renan, "the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and [. . .] the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together" (19) is what binds people together and helps turn them into (in Benedict Anderson's much later coinage) an "imagined community." For Renan, museums – with their "artefacts" and "antiquities" – implicitly play a key role in this process (*Essais* 12); after all, they house, maintain, and (when necessary) edit the national canon of memory. Building on Renan's ideas,

2 Ernest Renan notes that many suggest that "race" is a key component of a nationality, but he wisely argues that "there is no pure race and to make politics depend upon ethnographic analysis is to surrender it to a chimera. The noblest countries [. . .] are those where the blood is most mixed" (14).

various later scholars have noted that collective memory also helps defend national identity against the threat of heterogeneity, discontinuity, and contradiction, and gives that identity a kind of permanence and solidity: as Simon During puts it, individuals "as subjects become not a diverse and hierarchical mixture of different manners and customs, but transparent and equal to one another" (145).

In the "Then" sections of *A Museum in Baghdad*, the British and Iraqi characters are all well aware that Iraq is a new construct, created when Gertrude (and other British officials) drew some lines on a map in the wake of the Great War. They also repeatedly express concerns that the new polity will have a hard time cohering due to the fact that the borders draw together various "tribes" and diverse religious and ethnic groups ("Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Jews"), who may face difficulties considering themselves part of one common identity (37). Gertrude – as a key person involved in creating Iraq's borders – is especially attuned to this issue, and the museum is her way of helping to mitigate it. As she says in the play:

> [The British authorities] set me an impossible task – an unwinnable game. [. . .] Make a country. What did they all have in common? Not language. Not tradition. No. But the past. Immovable, intractable, unchangeable history. A nation needs to be able to look into the eyes of the past and understand where they come from. What legacy they carry in them. And what a legacy – one of the first civilisations. While palaces, laws and complicated administrative systems were being built here, bronze age Britain was grappling with basic pottery. Every Iraqi should know this. Feel absolute pride. (18–19)

However, as long as the British rule Iraq, Gertrude's aim in this regard is doomed to fail, because exacerbating secular tensions in its colonies was key for Britain to maintain power over those colonies. This was seen time and again in countries like India and Ireland as well as Arab countries such as Egypt, Palestine, and Bahrain (Doyle; Hazran; Al-Shehabi).[3] Leonard Woolley, Gertrude's famous British archaeologist colleague – and another character in the play – shows the mainstream British attitude regarding growing tensions between Iraqis. He is fixated on getting as many nice artefacts as possible for the British Museum – Gertrude archly describes his recurring refrain of "what's in it for me?" as "the Englishman's mantra" (5, 35). And he nonchalantly tells her, regarding the antiquities intended for the Iraqi museum: "I predict it'll all be back to the BM [British Museum] in time for tea when civil war erupts again and they [the Iraqis] go back to their tribes" (5, 36). He does not feel the tragedy of this, as Gertrude does. Later in

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3 It should be acknowledged, as these scholars do, that some local leaders in the colonies cooperated in this exploiting of secular tensions, in the name of consolidating support for their own political causes or factions.

the play, when he realizes that the British are losing their firm grip on King Faisal and the country as a whole, he seems indifferent to the influences of the British, first, having yoked arguably incompatible groups together and, second, having further stirred up the tensions between those groups.

Britain directly controlled Iraq from its invasion in 1914 until it installed King Faisal as a puppet monarch in 1921. It continued to rule Iraq through its mandate until 1932, when the British surrogate power, the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, was established. The sectarian tensions previously reified and exacerbated by the British when they ruled the country directly and through its mandate would remain deeply embedded in Iraqi life until the Hashemite monarchy (that is, Britain's proxy) was overthrown by a military coup in 1958.[4] The leader of that coup, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, was from a mixed Sunni-Shi'ite background and helped usher in a brief "Golden Age," in which Iraqis from various religious and ethnic backgrounds were able to set aside their grievances. These tensions resurfaced in the late 1960s and continued (to a degree) under Ba'athist rule, but it was after another imperial power entered Iraq in 2003 – the USA – that sectarian strife exploded into a full-blown crisis and, indeed, civil war. The Americans saw the benefits of the "divide and rule" policy previously employed by the British, since tensions between Iraqis left space for the Americans to exert more control over the emerging political landscape in Iraq.

Khalil uses Layla in the "Now" sections of her play to voice Iraqis' anger over America's simultaneous indifference to the bloodshed stirred up by its invasion and its lack of understanding of power dynamics between groups in Iraq. Layla most often voices these criticisms to Sam York, a female US soldier stationed in the museum in the run-up to its reopening. York regularly and unwittingly reveals America's ignorance about Iraq, but – to Khalil's credit – York is not a one-dimensional character. We are told in the dramatis personae that she is from the "*Deep South*" (2), but we are not told the colour of her skin. What is clear, however, is that she is from a poor background and that – thanks to America's lax gun laws – her brother was murdered, just as Layla's brother was killed in the fighting in post-invasion Iraq. Khalil draws attention to intersectionality here, showing that marginalized individuals from a hegemonic group (in this case, a poor woman from a Western power) can also experience discrimination. This point was further underlined in the original RSC production of the play, since York was played by Debbie Korley, a Black British actor of Ghanaian descent.

4 It should be noted that the British "reoccupied" Iraq in 1941, to prevent the Nazis from taking control there. The British used the Hashemite government as a mere "puppet" while effectively ruling Iraq directly until 1947.

The fact that York is ignorant about Iraq – and from a marginalized sociocultural background and gender herself – means that she is well placed to look at Iraqi society without as much prejudice as the mostly white, male Americans driving the invasion. Thus, Khalil can use York's open-minded praise of Iraq and its people to undermine the whole basis for British colonialism and American neocolonialism in Iraq: that is, the idea that Western powers have something to "teach" the "less civilized" Iraqis.

Museums, Colonialism, and Neocolonialism

In the play, there are many instances in which the playwright conveys the message that Iraqi people are educated and civilized. In one of her conversations with Layla, York describes her astonishment regarding what she encountered when first walking the streets of Baghdad:

> Well, in my first week here I was patrolling on the Friday, on Mutanabi Street, and I came across the book market there, what an incredible sight, as if the street was paved with books, and cars covered in books too and people all gathered around reading – not buying just reading like they were eating up the pages . . . (33–34)

Layla explains that the Iraqis "can't afford to buy" the books (34). Later in the play, Layla uses an English word that York does not know ("euphemism"), and she tells Layla: "Your English is real good" (64). In what is effectively a continuation of their previous conversation, Layla explains that Iraq "used to have the highest rates of English literacy in the Arab world" (64).

These conversations between York and Layla recall the famous Arabic adage that "Egypt writes, Lebanon prints, and Iraq reads" (Maasri 132–162). They also mirror Gertrude's praising of Iraq's rich intellectual history as well as her reflections on the lack of "civility" of the West – not just in the distant past but also as demonstrated by recent atrocities committed by Western powers in their colonies and even in Europe itself. For example, at one point, Gertrude expresses disgust over Britain's brutality when suppressing the 1920 revolt in Iraq, and Woolley blithely responds: "Disaster was coming – we stepped in and did what was required" (62). She also discusses France's "scandalous" bloodshed in its colony of Syria (56), and the general brutality of the Great War. She tells Woolley:

> after the war in Europe many [Arabic] people said to me over and over again that it was a shock and a surprise to them to see Europe relapse into barbarism. I had no reply – what else can you call the war? How can we, who have managed our own affairs so badly, claim to teach others to manage theirs better? (62)

These scenes emphasize that Iraqis do not need to learn how to be "civilized" or "free" from Western countries that often demonstrate a marked degree of "barbarism" and that often suppress "freedom" in their own countries and abroad. And yet, thanks to the very nature of a museum backed by British power in 1926 and by American-backed Iraqi ministers in 2003, Gertrude and later Iraqi staff members like Ghalia and Layla might actually be complicit in a Western "civilizing" mission in Iraq. After all, in order to dominate a nation through colonialism and neocolonialism, it is important to destroy or distort its history. As Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out, colonizers always tried very hard to obliterate nations' histories or "obliged" them to "forget" or misremember that history. He explains that it was fear or anxiety that subjugated nations would retain and take strength from a "totaliz[ing] national will" and "historical memory" that drove colonizers to obscure, distort, or even completely wipe out key aspects of its colonies' pasts (311). As Frantz Fanon puts it in his classic work *The Wretched of the Earth*: "colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (170).

Writing about "the museum," Peter Vergo argues that it "should be about ideas, reconstructed as facilitator of dialogue and communication rather than the source of authoritarian knowledge" (qtd. in Walliss 227). Yet museums have often served a hegemonic power in forcing a (false) narrative of the past on to a people. As *A Museum in Baghdad* attempts to show, colonizing powers like Britain or neocolonial powers like the USA (who seek "regime change" in nations that they want to dominate politically and exploit economically) have happily backed the opening or reopening of museums. But crucially, as the play also shows, they have sought to influence what artefacts go into those museums and have been unhappy with directors whose political views are, in the eyes of (neo)colonial officialdom, "suspect." This is why Woolley and the British authorities tried to force Gertrude to go back to England. As she helplessly says about the reports that she writes to her superiors in the British colonial administration: "they are tired of my truths. But I can't just tell them what they want to hear . . ." (56). The strongly pro-Iraqi sentiments that Gertrude occasionally articulates worry the colonial authorities, who had presumably hoped that her museum would merely perpetuate the idea that the people who lived in Mesopotamia/Babylon/Uruk were great *once upon a time* (if a bit "backwards") and that they needed the United Kingdom to teach them how to be truly "civilized."

Similarly, it seems that the American-backed Iraqi authorities may have chosen the fictional Ghalia to run the museum in 2006, because they hope that, thanks to the years she spent working in England and France, her presentation of the artefacts will reflect the views of someone who has come to see the benefits of

Western political “freedom” and market capitalism. It seems that, despite Ghalia’s best intentions, they may have been right. At one point, during an angry conversation, Layla refers to the Museum of Iraq as “this globalized, commodified, Western version of a museum” (25). She believes that it continues to be complicit in “shaping [the] historical narrative in the way that suits those in power” and suggests that it copies Western museums in presenting the “artefacts as trophies” (25).

The Liminal Identities of Gertrude and Ghalia

As was implied above, Gertrude and Ghalia have more in common than might be apparent at first. Both feel that they have the best interest of Iraq at heart, and yet they are both more inescapably “Westernized” than they might realize.

Gertrude’s aim to set up a museum that unifies and inspires Iraqis, giving them a sense of their glorious past and making a bright future possible, is an extremely noble one. As she puts it: “I need to remind them of their past – so they carry it with them into a future where this nation regains its place as the most important in the region if not the world.” But she quickly becomes (according to the stage directions) “*self-conscious*” and confesses that “I don’t think I can put it quite like that for the *Illustrated London News*” (19).

Gertrude’s great sympathy for Iraqis was previously shown by her learning so much about the country (and the Middle East in general) and creating “antiquity laws” that would ostensibly keep artefacts found in Iraq *within* Iraq. As noted above, Khalil depicts her as becoming more and more disenchanted with how the British are handling Iraq. However, as the play also makes clear, Gertrude remains more of a servant to the British Empire and has more of a condescending Western attitude than she might be willing to acknowledge to herself. In other words, Gertrude’s character is dialectical: she is presented not just as good and on the side of the Iraqis, but also as an exploiter. Indeed, there are several examples of her colonialist agenda and outlook. Perhaps most notably, she maintains a naive belief in the benevolent role that the British Empire can play in Iraq, saying “I have such hope for our British mandate here” (56). As she explains a little later in the play to her Iraqi employee Salim, she believes that after “Britain’s mandate” has run for its scheduled “twenty-five years,” “we will give you independence” (66) – presumably because the Iraqis will then be ready (in Britain’s eyes) to rule themselves. But, as Salim wisely notes in response: “Independence is never given, it is always taken” (67). Likewise, her language regarding Iraq, Iraqis, and the museum can be quite condescending and possessive. For example, Gertrude often refers to “my” museum and “my” artefacts, thereby under-

mining her speeches stressing that the museum and the antiquities belong first and foremost to the Iraqi people.

As the play draws to the close, Gertrude demonstrates increasing pessimism regarding her "creations": both Iraq and the museum. In one of the closing scenes, she seems ready to allow the statue of a woman that she has been fighting to keep in Iraq to be transferred to the British Museum. When Salim questions her about this, she eventually says: "Maybe she's not Iraqi at all – when she was carved there was no Iraq was there? So maybe it doesn't matter where she is" (85). This betrays all of the principles that led her to found the museum in the first place. And together with her announcement that she is going back to England, it makes the hubris that caused her to "create" the new country of Iraq on a map seem not like a careful manoeuvre undertaken by someone who cares deeply about the Arab world but like the capricious whim of someone who ultimately does not really have "skin in the game" – someone who will leave the country to go back to her "real" home whenever it suits.

That said, Khalil does not present too harsh a final picture of Gertrude. Gertrude lets the audience (and Salim) know that she is not really going back to England. She simply feels impotent in the face of the British authorities, who are now excluding her from the corridors of power and who refuse to "heed [her] warnings" (56) regarding how they are (mis)handling Iraq. Gertrude therefore commits suicide – as she seems to have done in real life. (There is some debate over whether her death was really a suicide.) At one point, Woolley and Gertrude discuss his discovery of "The Great Death Pit" in Ur, and Gertrude proves to him that the women in the pit were *forced* to commit suicide, which means it was not "a neat – a willing death," it was "murder" (53). Khalil, showing sympathy for Gertrude, uses this conversation (planted earlier in the play) to cleverly imply that Gertrude's suicide was also not really a choice, but something she was forced into by her increasingly negative treatment at the hands of men in power.

With regards to Ghalia, the time she spent abroad has exiled her from what the other Iraqis consider a thoroughly Iraqi identity. They often make remarks to her such as "You need to be more Iraqi about things" (69) and "your accent sounds Lebanese" (76) and note that her grandson has a "good English name," Winston (59). Ghalia reacts angrily and/or defensively to all of these remarks, stressing her Iraqi nationality and pointing out that her grandson's full name is "Winston *Ahmed*" (59). The implication is that, because she lived in England and France for so many years, she has adopted something of a "Western" outlook and cannot fully relate to those who had to stay in Iraq through all of its recent traumas. While Ghalia may deny this for much of the play, by the end she has come to realize that there are elements of truth to it. She not only acknowledges that she desires to move back to England, but also that the museum should be run by

someone (preferably her employee Mohammed with his bride-to-be Layla) who is uncomplicatedly Iraqi and who will ensure that the museum presents the Iraqi past in a way suitable for the ordinary citizens of Iraq. In other words, there will be no Western "taint" in how the material is displayed and contextualized.

This is an interesting angle for Khalil to take, given that she herself can presumably relate to Ghalia's East/West dilemma. Khalil, who currently lives in England, is the daughter of a Palestinian father and an Irish mother, and she has explained that she "grew up in the UAE [United Arab Emirates] but spent every long summer in Windgap, my family's small village in Kilkenny." She adds:

> I'm asked whether I feel more Irish or Palestinian. The truth is I identify as both, although I'm often denied as the former by my Irish countrymates because of my English accent; and as the latter by fellow Palestinians because of my pale skin. No matter – my access to the two cultures has given me a unique perspective on both. (Khalil, "When I Tell")

In the play, there are indications of both sides of her heritage. There is a notable reference to "Palestine" (20), and the whole play reveals Khalil's abundant knowledge of the Arab world. As regards the playwright's Irish side, Woolley at one point compares the tensions between the Iraqi "tribes" to those that would exist if you put "an Englishman, Scotsman, Welshman and a Paddy" together in the same house (37). It is noteworthy that he reserves the negative nickname – "Paddy" – for the country in the Atlantic Archipelago (traditionally "British Isles") that fought hard for independence from British rule and whose enduring problems with sectarianism have often been linked by historians and commentators to British interference.

Another key Irish aspect is the clear debt that the play owes to the work of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. Most notably, we are told in the stage directions that the performance area "*should begin sandless but gradually more and more sand* [*should be*] [. . .] *introduced throughout the play*" (2). Then, towards the end of the play, "*sand begins to fall*" on the already much sandier stage space until it buries the imminently dead Gertrude. This is an obvious allusion to Beckett's *Happy Days* (1960), in which the female protagonist Winnie is buried – first "*up to above her waist*" and later "*up to* [*her*] *neck*" (271, 295) – in what commentators have suggested is "the sands of time" (Knowlson) or, more specifically, the "sand[s]" of "patriarchal time" (Inoue 61–62).[5] This parallels Gertrude – victim of patriarchal, misogynistic bias – getting buried in sand in Khalil's play.

5 It should be noted that, while Beckett's script does not specify which substance should comprise the "mound" (271) that buries Winnie, most theatres and theatre companies have preferred sand (or a combination of sand and other bulking materials) – not only for dramaturgical reasons related to the play's time theme but also because it is easier to transport and handle than soil.

There is another important Beckettian echo in *A Museum in Baghdad*. One of the play's central poetic "chorus" passages makes a deliberate nod to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). In Khalil's play, the chorus members say:

> A noise [. . .]
> There's a buzzing to it
> Like bees
> Like drums
> Like drones
> But it is human
> It is voices.
> Many
> Raised [. . .]
> In a wave.
> A swell.
> A typhoon. (53–54)

This strongly recalls the famous exchange between Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's play:

> ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.
> VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.
> ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
> VLADIMIR*:* Like sand.
> ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
>
> [*Silence.*]
>
> VLADIMIR: They all speak at once.
> ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.
>
> [*Silence.*]
>
> VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.
> ESTRAGON: They rustle.
> VLADIMIR: They murmur.
> ESTRAGON: They rustle.
>
> [*Silence.*] [. . .]
>
> VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.
> ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
> VLADIMIR: Like ashes.
> ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
>
> [*Long silence.*] (52–53)

Note that these poetic sequences in the two plays each use a series of similes to describe the "noise" made by many "voices."

A final possible Irish reference in Khalil's play is the emphasis on the harp found in "The Great Death Pit" – the harp being Ireland's national instrument and Ireland being the only country in the world with a musical instrument as its national symbol. In real life, one harp and three lyres (often collectively called the "Four Lyres of Ur") were found by Woolley in the tomb, but these become "just one" "harp" (51) in Khalil's play.

The Palestinian and Irish references in the play help Khalil to broaden the points she is making regarding colonialism and the British Empire. That is the positive side associated with having a transnational background and being a "third culture kid" (Pollock and Van Reken): she can speak into and about various cultures with authority. And yet, as she reveals through the character of Ghalia, her time in the West (whether in Ireland throughout her formative years or in England later on) has meant that she will inevitably face a degree of distrust from Arabs who are suspicious of her background. The play seems to acknowledge the idea that there might be a limit to the influence that someone like Khalil or her character Ghalia (or, in her own way, Gertrude Bell – with her "mixed" English/ "Arabophile" identity) can have in the Arab world. That said, through this play and her critically acclaimed plays about her Palestinian heritage such as the award-winning or award-nominated works *Plan D* (2010), *Bitterenders* (2015), and *Scenes from 68* Years* (2016), Khalil has shown that a person from a mixed background can undoubtedly accomplish important work in the West. Specifically, she has helped put the stories of people from the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region up on mainstream British, Irish, and North American stages and has made Western audiences examine the prejudices that they possess regarding people from MENA backgrounds.

Conclusion

Dramaturgically, one of the most interesting aspects of *A Museum in Baghdad* is its second "timeless" character (besides Nasiya): Abu Zaman, played in the original production by Iraqi actor Rasoul Saghir.[6] This character's name – which translates as "Father of Time" – gives an indication of his role in the play. He not only appears in all three time periods, he also tosses a coin which seems to manipulate

6 Ghalia was played by British actor Rendah Heywood, whose father is Iraqi. The remaining Iraqi roles were all played by British actors of Arabic descent.

time. Additionally, he clearly hopes that his coin-tossing will help to alter future events, especially the scene we see acted out repeatedly during "Later" sections throughout the play: an older version of Mohammed (now director of the museum) is kidnapped by three masked men and "*hustle*[*d*] [. . .] *out of the space*" (7). This scene indicates that the cycle of violence in Iraq and the assailing of the museum will continue into the future. The cyclical nature of the events we have witnessed on stage is emphasized further by the fact that Abu Zaman's first line in the play and one of his last lines is the same: "It's time" (3, 91). This could be another allusion to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which the last lines of the first and second acts are the same:

> ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?
> VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.
> [*They do not move.*] (46, 85)

This repetition together with the repetitive "round" that Vladimir sings at the start of the second act suggest that the characters in *Waiting for Godot* are enduring the same or similar days over and over again – just as the people of Iraq are caught in an endless cycle of invasion and suffering.

Another indication that the cycle of violence in Iraq will continue is that the play ends with a "Later" sequence in which the older Layla is presumably about to discover that Mohammed has been killed by the three masked men who abducted him from the museum. Khalil is probably hoping that the pessimistic aspects of the play's ending will inspire people to work for a better future for Iraq and its national museum – that is, that they will try to prevent the future tragedies predicted in the play from unfolding in real life.

That said, the play's ending is not entirely negative or cautionary: Khalil does offer some glimmers of hope that the cycle of destruction might eventually be broken. This is not just a reference to the fact that Abu Zaman is fervently hoping to manipulate events in order to create a more peaceful future. We also have Gertrude's last conversation in the play, in which she begs Salim to assure her that the artefacts in the museum will one day be accessible to what she calls "normal people," that is, the ordinary citizens of Iraq. She also wants to know when it might happen: "Next week, next month? Next year? In ten years? 1936? One hundred? 2026? Will it ever be the right time – safe enough?" (85). She worries that she has been "premature in creating this place," but Salim assures her that she has not (85). This seems to be a signal from Khalil that the museum *has* had a good effect on Iraq since Gertrude Bell founded it in 1926 – despite the degree to which it may have been compromised by the interference of Western powers, Western-backed Iraqi ministers, or even "Westernised" Iraqis working in it. Indeed, it would be strange if the play cast a wholly negative light on the museum's

history and attempts to resurrect it. After all, as Khalil has noted on multiple occasions (Webster; Anon.; Khalil, "First Person"; McQueen; Tarzi; Gill), it was inspired by learning about Gertrude Bell through seeing a photo of her in the National Portrait Gallery in London and by going to see legendary Iraqi archaeologist Lamia al-Gailani Werr speak about the looting of the museum and attempts to reopen it.

In the end, the play suggests that, whatever its flaws, this museum – which has endured so much trouble – has at least partially fulfilled its mission to give Iraqis a sense that they are one people with a common past, despite their religious and ethnic differences. Finally, there is an implicit hope expressed in the play that the resurrected, post-looting museum will be a decolonized space that presents Iraq's rich history in a way that is edifying for Iraqis and is simultaneously of interest to the wider world.

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