

Dunya Mikhail's *The Beekeeper* and *In Her Feminine Sign*

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In 2014, Daesh entered the village of Kocho. They claimed that they would leave the villagers alone if they gave up all their weapons. The people quickly agreed to their demands in hopes that it would bring them peace and safety; but, three days later, Daesh mandated that the villagers also convert to Islam. The villagers refused. A week later Daesh loaded everyone into trucks to be escorted to Mount Sinjar; but, instead, they delivered them to the only school in Kocho. At the school, Daesh collected the villagers' gold and cash before separating the men and women. Daesh killed all the men, older women, and pregnant women and "dumped them into fishponds in the courtyard of the institute, then heaped soil on top so that not a single one of them could possibly survive." The remaining women's lives became torn between two worlds. One where they were called *jariya*, raped, and held captive, the other where they were called exiles, valued, and free.

The capture and escape of the Yazidi women of northern Iraq emanates from every page of Dunya Mikhail's *The Beekeeper*. Behind every story, though, is a man who gave up his main hobby of beekeeping to "smuggle families away from Daesh." Abdullah tells Mikhail that "what I'm doing now can't be described. I can't explain the feeling I get when I welcome back runaway girls, when they are reunited with their families. We all cry together, overcome with a mixture of joy and outrage." With his experience as a businessman who makes and sells honey in Iraq and Syria, Abdullah uses those same skills to cultivate "a hive of transporters and smugglers from both sexes to save our queens, the ones Daeshis call *sabaya*, sex slaves. We worked like in a

beehive, with extreme care and well-planned initiatives.” His efforts thus far have saved over three-hundred members of the Yazidi religious groups help captive by Daesh.

Abdullah’s phone never stops ringing with calls from other Yazidis asking him to help them rescue their relatives. However, the liberation of these women does not instantly heal them from their trauma, which often includes rape. For Daesh, the concept of raping women is seen as acceptable according to *shari’a law*, which is codified by the Quran in the corpus of Islamic jurisprudence. Rukmini Callimachi, a *New York Times* reporter who covers terrorism, in her podcast *Caliphate* explains how Daesh (ISIS) have

mined the body of Islamic views to lay out the steps through which a person is enslaved... and what ISIS does is they point to stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad and of his companions—stories of battle, when they invaded areas that were non-Muslim, and they took everything that they found there, both the property and the people, as war spoils. So the key is a battle in a time of war, and the victims have to be non-Muslims.

Now enter the Yazidis.

In ISIS’s view, they are *mushrikin*. This is the Arabic word for polytheist. So the fact that they practice a non-Muslim faith, and the fact that ISIS invaded their land in a time of war, meant that in the view of the terrorist group, they were fully eligible for enslavement. But they go one step further. They describe the act of raping these girls as essentially a holy act.

The sanctity of this violent act is not something that Daesh just say. For many of the women and girls who survive, the concept of rape as holy becomes a reality.¹

In *The Beekeeper*, Mikhail tells a story about a mother and her children who are sold to Daesh and experience constant abuse. One day the mother asks the man who bought her, "If you had a sister, would you let someone treat her the way you're treating me?" He calmly responds by saying that "he was doing the right thing, implementing *shari'a* law. Even when he raped [her], he justified it by saying it was a kind of 'worship.' He ordered [her] to pray with him before raping [her]." Constant violation is not unknown to these women, yet they still remain resilient and look for ways to get to safety. When Mikhail talks to Badia, a Yazidi woman from Kocho, she shares her five tricks for escaping Daesh:

The first trick was to stop bathing for an entire month, until she smelled so bad that the fighters would stay away from her, refusing to buy her. The second trick was to claim that she was married, and that the little child beside her was her son. It took longer for married women to be sold. The third trick was to pretend she was pregnant in order to avoid being raped, even if only temporarily. The fourth trick was to say that she'd just stepped outside with her girlfriend to get some air—that was the only reason. The fifth trick was to ask permission to call "the American Emir," to make it clear that she was not trying to run away from him.

At nineteen, Badia bravely defies her captor, even after multiple run away attempts and subsequent beatings, in order to rescue not only herself but also her nephew and another captive woman. However, not all the women are so lucky.

Maha, a pregnant woman whose husband was killed in Kocho, gave birth two months in to captivity. Her eldest daughter of fourteen was sold to another man and in hopes of saving her twelve year old daughter from the same fate she attempted to run away with her and her three

babies. They barely made it across the street before they were caught. As punishment, her captor poisoned the three babies and "buried them in the garden because 'they're infidels, and they don't deserve to be buried in a grave.'" Even though Maha and her daughter eventually escaped through the help of a neighbor, she told Abdullah "'what good is it that I survived? I wish I had died there with them. I wish they had buried me in that garden.'" After hearing Maha's words, Mikhail mentions how difficult it is for her to process her feelings, so she chooses to stare "at the walls instead, the walls of a house filled with people who can't be bought or sold—at least that's what we believe." Indeed that is what we ignorantly believe.

For an entire population, that nightmare became a reality, such that every Yazidi knows someone who still remains captive or who passed away. *How then should we respond to death?* For Abdullah, after burying his brother, facing death meant "saving even more people from the hands of the killers." Even so, November 2015 was a bittersweet month for the villagers. Sinjar became liberated from Daesh and a city once known in Kurdish as "the beautiful side" became "the land of mass graves." Although no one from Sinjar has yet to go home, Mikhail, twenty years after departing Iraq, returned to Baghdad in May 2016 not so much to visit the living, but to pay her respects to the dead. There was one survivor, though, that she did want to see: Abdullah. While there, he took her to visit the temple of Lalish where she "noticed colorful pieces of cloth tied around columns in one of the caves." She writes how

Abdullah nodded at me encouragingly as I untied one, making a wish as I retied it: wishes are supposed to come true when another visitor comes to unite it. I glanced at Abdullah and saw that he was doing the same thing as me. Next Abdullah picked up an untied medium-sized cloth, then stepped back a ways,

closed his eyes, and threw the piece toward a stone outcropping at the top of the cave where there were already many other pieces of cloth. 'You have to do the same thing, for good luck.'"

In that moment of untying the cloth and making a wish, Mikhail's new book of poems began to emerge:

Everyone is busy today
listing wishes on pieces
of paper they'll give to the wind.
When the stranger finds them
on her way, she'll collect them
and adorn them to her circle,
tossing off some old wishes
to make space for the new.
They say the dropped ones
will come true.

Before writing *The Beekeeper* as a non-fiction, Mikhail thought that she would write an epic, but soon she began to write a collection of poems in between the stories of the women who escaped from the clutches of ISIS. During Mikhail's experience of witnessing an open market to buy and sell women, her consciousness as a woman deepened. She told me that during this time she became a feminist, even though she was before, but she became more aware of feminism. Dunya Mikhail's new book of poems, *In Her Feminine Sign*, is a poetic extension to *The Beekeeper*, focusing on Mikhail's own experiences of exile from Iraq. Her title is based on a feminine symbol in Arabic, which is a circle with two dots over it as a suffix to make a feminine

word. It is called the "tied circle," symbolizing both her native language as well as how the terrorists also "tied" the hands of the women, taking them into the unknown.

Born in Baghdad, now living in Detroit, Mikhail's life interconnects between two different spaces: Iraq and America. In her author's note she writes, "I wrote these poems from right to left and left to right, in Arabic and English...To capture the poem in two lives is to mirror my exile, with all of its possibilities and risks. But as home is flashed through exile, a poem is sometimes born on the tip of another tongue." Her concept of occupying multiple spaces resonates with the stories of the stolen women of Iraq who are also unable to return to their homes. In a conversation with Abdullah, he tells Mikhail that "of course we want the region to be fully liberated so that we can return to our past lives. But, in fact, something inside us has changed forever. Some people will never return. On the other hand, this disaster has opened our eyes to some beautiful stances and wonderful people." Mikhail echoes Abdullah's sentiment throughout her new books of poems as she looks at what it means to occupy a space that she can call home and exile.

In Her Feminine Sign is divided into three parts: "The Tied Circle," "Tablets," and "T/here." The first section is where the reader is introduced to the Arabic feminine sign, ة , which Mikhail describes in her opening poem "The Stranger in Her Feminine Sign:"

Feminine words are followed
by a circle with two dots over it.
They call this symbol *the tied circle*,
knotted with wishes
which come true only when forgotten
or replaced by the wishes of others.

Her opening poem takes us back to the caves of the temple of Lalish, where, for the first time, Mikhail took part in prayer at the Yazidi's holiest place. Within the temple,

The columns are draped with prayer cloths, and pilgrims may make their wishes by first untying a knot, thus releasing the previous pilgrim's wish to be granted, then tying and retying the knot three times while reflecting on their own wish. On the third turn, they tie it tight, having made their wish.²

While Mikhail's tied circle within the temple was a sanctified experience, she acknowledges that not all wishes are made on holy ground. While visiting Pittsburg, a friend showed her the City Asylum project, local homes that asylum seekers turned in to works of art. What fascinated Mikhail the most was "the garden, not only because the residents had planted their favorite varieties, but the people passing by had written down their dreams on pieces of paper that were clipped to the fence." The image of hand-written wishes on a chain-linked fence stuck with Mikhail when she visited the Carnegie Museum of Art for the *She Who Tells a Story* photo exhibition. One particular photo, taken by women from Iran and the Arab world caught her attention. The photo entitled *Today's Life and War* depicted an "Iranian couple hanging their laundry on barbed wire—their pieces of clothing looked like white flags in a time of war, or like delayed dreams." As wars rage on, Mikhail notes that a decade of killing is almost enough time for the "dreams, theirs, and ours, to dry on the ropes."

With wishes lingering in the background, Mikhail's poems transition from the dreams of her people to explore the concept of occupying neither home nor exile,

If birds' memories are circles, a line
must bisect them, tracing their migration
to places that are neither their homelands nor exiles.

A symbol of peace and beauty, birds also represent freedom because of their liberty to travel wherever they choose. In their flight towards the lands they call their own, birds unknowingly cross over our homelands and our exiles without so much as a glance. Though Mikhail does not migrate between two places, she seemingly inhabits her home and exile at the same time. While she lives in Detroit, a location she considers home, Michigan also suggests her exile *from* Baghdad. Her exile *from* began when she left Baghdad twenty-four years ago to start her journey to America. However, when asked how she views Baghdad and Detroit, Mikhail said "I don't have a sense of exile in a certain place or another. When I am writing I am at home. When I can't write freely I am in exile. When I am living in dignity I am at home. When I can't be myself I am in exile."

In Mikhail's "Tablets" section, the form of her poems turn in to Iraqi haikus that mirror Sumerian symbols carved onto clay tablets. These haikus employ one of the oldest forms of communication while simultaneously depicting modern word pictures. Trying to imitate such carvings in the absence of words, Mikhail draws images to accompany her haikus, transmuting them into the substance of our daily lives. Along with her change in poetic structure, Mikhail begins to focus on how home and exile, once separate entities, might merge in to one. Coincidentally, Mikhail discovers that Baghdad and Detroit look poignantly familiar when she describes,

The map of Iraq looks like a mitten
and so does the map of Michigan—
a match I made by chance.

In Detroit Mikhail hears fireworks that sound like "Baghdad explosions." She looks at the Detroit River and sees the "Tigris shore" where there are no "no bombs" to scare away the butterflies. Through the shape of a mitten, one land covers the other, melding the two in to one.

At the crossroads where Mikhail's home and exile start to blend lies the trampled grounds of warfare. In her poem, "Eva Whose Shadow is a Swan" Mikhail meets with a friend to talk about her homeland,

*I am from Baghdad, I replied,
a city we call the "home of peace,"
though war has lived in it
for two hundred years.*

For Mikhail, the combination of war and peace innately collide. Since her birth, even though the people who surrounded her were peaceful, war existed in Iraq. Even in adulthood, surrounded by the calm waters of the Finger Lakes, war is not unknown to the United States. In her section, "T/here," Mikhail's poem "The War in Colors" reveals the American perspective of war,

the digital map on the wall
displays American wars
in colors:
Iraq in purple
Syria in yellow
Kuwait in blue
Afghanistan in red
Vietnam in green.
The war
on the map
is beautiful.

Across multiple lands, the United States has been engaged in a combative kaleidoscope for ninety-three percent of her existence. Unlike her friend from Stockholm, "*home to no war for two hundred years*," Mikhail's lifetime has known war from both up close and far away. In *The Beekeeper*, Mikhail describes how "from above there are no souls, only bodies, but they are seen as hollow forms, moving the way atoms do in the universe—unseen. From above, it's possible for bodies to disappear, to assimilate into water or earth or fire or air." Disguised by bright colors, the map does not show fear or the "people unable to use the restroom because they are walking in the open air." Through her paradox of war and peace, the concept of "there" and "here" becomes relative. Wherever she looks "there" is a color of war and next to it, "here" is beauty. Mikhail reflects on this dichotomy, stating that "although the histories of America and Iraq have both been involved in war more than in peace, there is still peace amidst the peoples and a yearning to learn about the other and about the beauty of the world when one is able to extend a hand to the other."

The act of humanity reaching out is a deliberate choice. For worn torn countries, every passage is an exodus, and every exodus includes individuals hoping to be seen.

The "N" on the doors,
An exodus
From houses
No keys
No compass
No words.

Mikhail's poem extends back to *The Beekeeper* where the letters marked on the villagers' homes and stores are what remain in Sinjar: "N for the Christians, and Y for the Yazidis. S for the

Sunnies, and *Sh* for the Shi'ites." As the villagers fled their homes, leaving everything behind, the women were forced in to slavery, while the young boys were forced to train in Daesh camps. In Abdullah's opinion, "it's horrible to be a girl with Daesh. But it's even worse to be a boy:"

On the Turkish shore,
A calm beautiful graceful child is on his stomach
The wave caresses his tiny corpse
He doesn't seem to protest our ridiculousness,

Though his face is turned away from us,
From our lives overturned like a rusty boat.

Mikhail elaborates on this image in "My Poem Will Not Save" where we are brought back to the Turkish shore with the toddler "lying face down / on the sand, and the waves gently receding / from his body as if a forgotten dream?" But Mikhail's poem does not "turn him onto his back" or "block the shells" or "stop the buildings/ from collapsing." She assures us that the mistakes of life will not be fixed by her poem, but, she concedes,

I don't know why the birds
sing
during their crossings
over our ruins.
Their songs will not save us,
although, in the chilliest times,
they keep us warm,
and when we need to touch the soul
to know it's not dead,
their songs
give us that touch.

The birds' songs offer Mikhail hope amidst the war zones. She acknowledges that the experience of home and exile is not felt in isolation, but instead observes that "we are all refugees. / We move on, feeling that we've left something/behind." Mikhail reveals that *something* through a quote from Leonard Cohen in her poem, "What We Carry to Mars:" "*There is a / crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.*" People are broken. Just as the brokenness of Sinjar is "hidden under layers of stone and history," so also is our brokenness "hidden under our skin." Despite the brokenness we try to hide, Abdullah offers a way to heal through a conversation with Mikhail,

In the old days the people in my village used to plant olive trees despite the fact that olive trees take a long time to bear fruit, sometimes even longer than the life span of the planter. That's why they say 'the olive grower isn't selfish'; whoever plants the tree knows in advance that its yield won't belong to him. Actually I no longer see the point in growing anything, even if it only takes a couple of days, because I can't be sure what's going to happen tomorrow. And I don't like growing a tree that I'll only have to leave behind.

I know. Abdullah, you left behind your house, your garden, and all of your belongings in Sinjar. If you could be back at your house for one hour, what would you take with you from there?

I wouldn't take anything. I'd just want to water the plants.

Mikhail's works remind her readers that all of humanity experiences exile while searching for a place to call home; but, during our journey, we can all choose to water where we go. As she writes to her readers, "The poet is at home in both texts, yet she remains a stranger. This English

edition shows readers one side of the mirror." Her stories encourage readers to welcome both the stranger and the native in to the places they occupy in hopes that one day we might reveal to each other all the sides of our mirrors. These narratives tell us "how much we humans need each other, and how much harm and how much kindness we can do to one another. No matter what race, religion, or color, it's humanity that distinguishes us as human beings, at the end."

Notes

¹"Chapter 9: Prisoners, Part 1." *Caliphate* from *The New York Times*, 20 August, 2019.

²Clancy, Levi. "Take a walking tour of Lalish's main temple." *Kurdistan 24*, 20 August 2019.

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DUNYA MIKHAIL was born in Baghdad, Iraq, and moved to the United States thirty years later in 1995. After graduating from the University of Baghdad, she worked as a journalist and translator for the *Baghdad Observer*. Facing censorship and interrogation, she left Iraq, first to Jordan and then to America, settling in Detroit. New Directions published her books *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*, *The Iraqi Nights*, *Diary of A Wave Outside the Sea*, and *The War Works Hard*—chosen as one the New York Public Library's Books to Remember in 2005—as well as her edited volume, *15 Iraqi Poets*. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Knights Foundation grant, a Kresge Fellowship, and the United Nations Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing, and works as a special lecturer of Arabic at Oakland University in Michigan.