

Quarterly Literary Review

IDEOLOGY & INTEGRATION IN INAAM KACHACHI'S SAYF SIWISRI

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Issue I

ABOUT FIKER INSTITUTE'S QUARTERLY LITERARY REVIEW

Fiker Institute's Quarterly Literary Review is an invitation to rethink Middle Eastern literature and utilize it not only as a mirror of society, but rather as a tool to observe and analyze social, political, and ethical constructs in regional and global contexts. With contested identities, borders, and histories, the Middle East's rich repository of literary work continues to shed light on the evolving dynamics of the region and its diasporas. Each installment of Fiker Institute's Quarterly Review takes contemporary Arab or Middle Eastern texts as a starting point to discuss broader landscapes of discourse such as identity, migration, morality, and history.

INTRODUCTION

What if ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim had not overthrown the Iraqi monarchy in 1958? What if Michel Aflaq had not written the foundational texts for the Ba’athi political party? What if the Iraqi *coup d’état* of 1963 had not taken place? Alternative history, as a sub-genre of speculative fiction, allows writers to envision different realities and outcomes for events that have triggered pivotal landmarks in history. In *Sayf Siwisri* (A Swiss Summer), Iraqi author Inaam Kachachi tries to answer these questions in retrospect. A newly developed Swiss medicine, which is referred to as “bonbon” throughout her novel, can cure people from the deadliest disease of all—ideology. Perhaps, Kachachi argues, all these questions could have been avoided if ideology were no longer an epidemic.

In her first foray into speculative fiction, Kachachi invites the reader to participate in a laboratory experiment alongside her four main characters, examining if anything can cure the Iraqi nation’s affliction. *Sayf Siwisri* is an imaginative attempt at exploring the possibility of moving past the fundamentalist ideologies that have gripped Iraq since the early twentieth century and asks, if we cannot go back to change history—stop coups, executions, and the catalysts for exile—can we expect different outcomes in the future, knowing what we know now?

Sayf Siwisri is centered on a Swiss pharmaceutical company’s experiment testing a new drug that cures ideology. It is unclear what year the events take place, but Kachachi sets her story in the years before the US invasion of Iraq. The Swiss government reached out to four Iraqi immigrants, who are scattered in different European countries where they sought asylum after leaving Iraq, and who represent different ideological factions. There is Hatem, the Ba’athi ex-security officer; Bashira, the leftist; Dalala, a Jehovah’s Witness preacher; and Ghuzwan, a Shi’i fundamentalist. All are invited to a fully paid stay in the city of Basel as they routinely take experimental medicine. However, halfway through the experiment, the four Iraqis decide to stop taking the “bonbon”, afraid that they would forget their memories of the homeland if they were “cured”, and realizing their disaffection with European double standards. The novel is an exploration of forced migration, fundamentalism and its origins, cultural identity, and the lasting effects of colonization on the human psyche. Kachachi’s novel is also a rumination on the ethical and moral dilemmas of the integration of migrants into European societies. At its essence, *Sayf Siwisri* asks what it means to be accepted and integrated, and where the blame lies in systemic trauma.

IDEOLOGY SUMMERING IN BASEL

Born in Baghdad in 1952, Kachachi’s background as a journalist reporting on the

violence and conflict in Iraq informs her blending of reality with fiction to depict the trauma, identity issues, and flight of Iraqis from their homeland. As a migrant herself, moving from Iraq to Paris, Kachachi has written novels, such as *Al-Hafida al-Amrikiyya* (The American Granddaughter) and *Tashari* (The Dispersal), that examine the plight of Iraqi immigrants and the social, political, and cultural wounds they carry with them as they remember and think of Iraq.

The theme of migration in *Sayf Siwisri* is a recurring one in all of Kachachi's works. In an interview, Kachachi explained her focus on the displacement of Iraqis saying that migration is "the stability of the age [...] the daughter of war."¹ The four ideologies that are found summering in Basel are embodied by the four Iraqi immigrants and their precarious positions—even if one of them, the Ba'athi Hatem, was part of the ruling party, Kachachi shows that the violence of dislocation can touch anyone. All four experienced tragic loss, as well as lasting psychological and physical damage, which is why a chance to summer in Switzerland comes as a golden opportunity.

Throughout the novel, the four characters carry the memory of Iraq and the injustices they both faced and enacted there within them. In reliving the memories, they are filtering them out of their systems, making room for the "bonbons" to take effect. Hatem, the burly and corrupt national security officer nicknamed "Comrade Great Wall of China,"² is a man firmly embedded in the machinery of power. He was known for his large frame and unwavering loyalty to the ruling Ba'athi political party. Yet, he finds himself haunted by memories that force him to question his role in a political life where obedience always preceded deliberation. He recalls the long nights of his past: prowling working-class neighborhoods, carrying out raids on "subversive elements," shadowing religious groups, conducting interrogations in detention centers—the echo of pleas, the cries and curses, the blows and fists.

One memory, in particular, unsettles him: the day he was ordered to eliminate his closest friend. "The execution will be carried out by the hands of the dearest comrades. Friends aiming at friends,"³ he remembers. Abu Muhammad, the man Hatem was required to shoot, had been his childhood companion and schoolmate, the one who had first drawn him into the Party. They had served their military years together; each had stood witness at the other's wedding. And it was Hatem's marriage, once so intimate, that came to its abrupt end when his wife decided she could no longer be with a man who had betrayed his closest friend. Switzerland seemed like the opportunity to relax and forsake the memories of the crimes he committed against his countrymen.

Bashira, the leftist comrade and former political prisoner who had been subjected to assault, travelled to Basel with her daughter, Sondos. Her leftist party organized her trip and arranged for her to marry a comrade, a man who had been tortured in prison and emerged broken, his manhood shattered. For Bashira, a Swiss summer is

a chance to recover in a country that had long been a haven for affluent Arabs—the wealthy, whom her party denounced as a “fifth column, vampires feeding on the blood of the workers, whose wealth and factories must be nationalized, whose lands must be seized and returned to the peasants and the people.”⁴

Then there are the two religious fundamentalists, although it is unclear what is fundamentalist about them. Arguably, Kachachi set out to show that being outwardly religious—either as a Christian or Muslim—and coming from a non-European background characterizes one as being fanatical. Dalala, the Assyrian Jehovah’s Witness preacher, and Ghuzwan, the Shi’i Muslim, are minor characters in the novel. They do not take center stage as Hatem and Bashira do, yet their stories also carry with them the violence enacted upon Iraq. Dalala is enamored by the spread of Jehovah’s Witnesses with the penetration of Western ideas into Iraqi society. Ghuzwan is the most elusive of all the characters. He had been a long-time resident in the prisons of Iraq—Kachachi does not explicitly state why, but it is implied that his imprisonment was due to his Shi’i faith.

At first glance, it seems that the Swiss pharmaceutical company’s experiment is a blessing and a moment of respite for all of them. “God Bless those Swiss,”⁵ Hatem says at the start of the novella. The many benefits given to the four lab rats are luxuries to them: comfortable beds, pocket money, opportunities to explore the life and culture of the city of Basel, and free food. All of this so they can take the mysterious orange and yellow pills to cure them of their “addiction” to ideology. Perhaps that is what Kachachi seeks to portray: that European luxuries hide behind the veil of fear of the ‘Other’. In such a portrayal, the four immigrants, representative of their war-torn country, embody the pent-up violence of ideology that could potentially disrupt the idyllic European life and must thus be ‘cured’.

THE MIGRANT AS ‘OTHER’

In the European imagination, the migrant, or ‘Other’, is cast as an existential threat to the cultural and moral fabric of so-called European values.⁶ The issue at hand is two-fold: to better accept the ‘Other’, they must integrate into society and give up their distinctive features, values, and cultural baggage. But at the same time, anti-migrant hostility perpetuates generalizations about the ‘parallel’ identities that migrants hide, even if they outwardly seem to have become part of European society.⁷ Shada Islam, a Brussels-based commentator on Asia and European Union affairs, depicts this dilemma as follows:

“Again and again European governments instruct us to integrate. Come in, step out of the shadows and join the sunny European mainstream. We should be less ‘foreign,’ more European, adopt ‘European values,’ [...] get an education, and then—

and only then—actively participate in the political, economic, and social life of our ‘host societies’.”⁸

While the process of curing Hatem, Bashira, Dalala, and Ghuzwan in Basel appears as a philanthropic policy of integration, it is inherently exclusionary. In identifying these four Iraqis as addicted to ideology—a fact that is portrayed as emblematically Iraqi—the Swiss authorities exclude them as ‘Other’, unable to participate in European society, which is portrayed as clean of ideology. There is an inherent fear that Kachachi delicately weaves into her narrative, namely that the four Iraqi immigrants’ loyalties to their ideologies would hinder their integration into their respective European societies.

Yet the irony is sharp: the ideologies that the Swiss pharmaceutical company seeks to purge, such as Communism, Ba’athism, and religious fundamentalism, are not inherently localized in Iraq, but are partly the fruits of Western colonization and imperialism in Iraq’s twentieth-century history. Communism in this part of the world was inspired and supported by global ideological currents, Ba’athism drew on European nationalist and fascist ideas,⁹ and fundamentalism was both fueled and opposed by Western interventionism. To treat these ideologies as wholly foreign, as though they emerged in isolation from Europe, is to absolve the Western world of complicity in producing the very traumas and violences it now wishes to keep at arm’s length.

Kachachi’s image of the “bonbon” as an ideological cure is therefore a satirization of Europe itself. Just as the novel suggests that Iraqis cannot simply swallow a pill and be rid of ideology, so too Europe cannot escape its own extremism. The rise of far-right movements across the continent, from the *Rassemblement National* in France to the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany, and the *Fratelli d’Italia* in Italy, all signal that Europe is wrestling with ideologies of exclusion, extremism, and fear as well. European far-right fundamentalism, with its rhetoric of closing borders, preserving cultural homogeneity, and demonizing migrants, is not so different from the extremes Europe projects onto its migrant ‘Others’.

In this light, *Sayf Siwisri* becomes more than a novel about Iraqis trying to escape their past in Switzerland, but rather it is a meditation on the West’s own ideological contradictions and moral dilemmas. Kachachi asks her readers to confront the uncomfortable truth: that the extremist ideology is not only being wrestled out of the unruly migrants in Basel’s pharmaceutical laboratories but is also found in the halls of European parliaments and the slogans of its nationalist parties.

Sayf Siwisri can also be fruitfully read in conversation with other novels about migration and the lived reality of Europe’s hypocritical welcoming of asylum seekers. One novel in particular is *The Village Indian* (*Der Falsche Inder*, 2008), initially written in German, by the Iraqi-German author Abbas Khider. Imprisoned for political activism

against Saddam Hussein's regime in 1996, Khider escaped Iraq and sought asylum in various European countries until he was granted it in Germany in 2000, giving him firsthand experience of the structural problems of the migration system in Europe.

Written in eight parts, *The Village Indian* is about an Iraqi asylum seeker, Rasul Hamid, who goes through eight different ways of escaping Iraq, and attempts eight different means to gain asylum in Europe, once as a fugitive, other times as a beggar, a stowaway, or a detainee—but failing. Through Rasul's eight failed attempts, Khider shows us the inner workings of the European migration crisis where asylum applicants wait in bureaucratic limbo. The novel's strange eight-part structure mirrors the instability of the migrant's position once arrived on European shores. Instead of finally enjoying a life of peace and safety, it is a life shaped irrationally and randomly by border officials, government employees, and illegal smugglers. The title of the book itself, *The Village Indian*, is an ironic jab at Europe's exoticization of the 'Other' and its stereotyping of migrants and refugees into boxes, while erasing their identity as diverse and unique individuals.

Kachachi also ironizes Europe's stereotypes of the 'Other' as an ideological fanatic. But while *Sayf Siwisri* focuses on the ambiguities, micro-aggressions, and double standards experienced by the migrant in Europe, Khider is quite explicit in his accounts of Europe's absurd and violent asylum regime. He portrays it as a double-edged sword that offers protection but also subjects the migrant to precarity and control. Yet, both novels highlight double standards in Europe's policies towards migrants.

ETHICS AND GUILT

For the protagonists of *Sayf Siwisri*, spending a summer in Basel shifts from a moment of healing, reconciliation, and tentative intimacy to a sharp confrontation with history. The characters, who first embrace the Swiss experiment as a chance for respite, soon discover that Basel is not a neutral laboratory of peace but a city heavy with political ghosts. As they wander through its streets, they begin to delve deeper into the so-called 'Swiss neutrality', unearthing instead the colonial and violent undertones of Europe's complicity in the Middle East's past and present.

The first moment of irony comes on one of Hatem's walks, when he comes across the towering facade of the UBS, the world's largest private bank. To him, the building is not a monument to financial stability, but a vault for corruption: the place where dictators and corrupt men deposited the millions stolen from their people. The same Swiss government that now offers Iraqis the "bonbon" to cure their ideological afflictions is also the one that quietly profited from their dispossession, securing the wealth of tyrants while Iraqis bore the costs of dictatorship and war. Kachachi writes about Hatem's experience of beholding the bank as follows:

“He read the name of the building and felt heaviness in his heart. [...] You invest the money that comes from international aid, pension plans, [...] millions from fake economic deals, all the earnings from trading historical artifacts, installments you give off [to the corrupt presidents] selling the homeland. Everything you keep should have been money that would have gone to the martyrs’ fund or bread for the poor.”¹⁰

Kachachi further develops her critique of Swiss ‘innocence’ when Hatem and Ghuzwan recall that it was in Basel, in 1897, that Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress. On that occasion, Herzl gathered over 200 delegates from across Europe with the stated aim of establishing the Basel Program, which declared Palestine as the site of the Jews’ new homeland. Hatem writes that the “Swiss bank building was not the first building to make my heart sick and shutter my morning.” Instead, he recounts how Ghuzwan had gone on a walk to explore the city on his own, and when he came back, he insisted that Hatem come with him to show him where the “congress took place”.¹¹ Hatem is upset with himself—how did he ignore this vital piece of information? He asks himself: “I looked up the history of the city and read about all its vast museums. I discovered the number of museums. A number that is equivalent to the sum of museums in all the Arab countries together,” but he forgot about Herzl in Basel, where “one hundred years ago, the poisoned meal was cooked”—referring to the start of the Zionist project and the eventual ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people.

In juxtaposing the Swiss banking system with the Zionist Congress, Kachachi refrains from perpetuating the image of the city of Basel as a space for healing, as she set out to do in the start of the novel but portrays it as a stage for historical reckoning. The “cure” for ideological addiction offered by the pharmaceutical company is revealed to be hollow, only a post-colonial gesture that seeks to treat the symptoms of extremism, while ignoring the deeper wounds inflicted by Western complicity and interventionism in Iraq.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF THE BONBON

What Kachachi’s *Sayf Siwisri* brings to light is not only the burden of Iraqi ideologies on its people, but also the deeper moral evasions of Europe and the resulting moral dilemmas. The Swiss pharmaceutical company’s experiment is framed as a benevolent intervention: curing Iraqis of the disease of ideology, integrating them into European life, and keeping extremism at bay in order for them to be accepted. But beneath this humanitarian veneer lies a troubling logic, a sort of conditionality: that the responsibility for, and susceptibility to, violence lies solely with the migrant, while Europe stands outside history as an impartial healer. Kachachi challenges this illusion by placing her characters in Basel, a city that embodies Europe’s complicity in Zionism, in financial

corruption, in the quiet perpetuation of colonial legacies.

Both Kachachi and Khider deny their readers the comfort of a neat ending. In *The Village Indian*, Rasul continues to resurface in different narratives and life trajectories—even if they all fail to gain him asylum. In their refusal of closure, *Sayf Siwisri* and *The Village Indian* insist that migration, whether forced or not, is not a bureaucratic problem or an inability to integrate that can be solved by curing ideology or having the perfect application for the border officer. Instead, it is a historical trajectory that Europe must reckon with and is rooted in the West's own colonial past and its continuing interference in the Middle East.

Sayf Siwisri raises pressing ethical questions: Who is responsible for the traumas of the Middle East? Can the countries of exile ever be free of guilt when Europe's own systems reap benefits from dispossession? And is integration a matter of mutual conviviality, or is it the erasure of migrants' history in an effort to preserve the myth of Western supremacy?

Kachachi does not offer easy answers. Her characters do not emerge from Basel cured of ideology, nor do they find in Switzerland the reconciliation they long for. Instead, they confront the uncomfortable truth that the “bonbon” is only a placebo, a means for the West to deal with its guilt without taking accountability in the very histories it seeks to “heal”.

In closing, Kachachi's *Sayf Siwisri* shows us precisely why literature matters for policy and public debate. Novels, poetry, and art allow us to trace the intimate entanglements of ideology, migration, and responsibility in ways that political analysis and policy briefs often cannot measure. By staging her experiment in Basel, Inaam Kachachi not only tells the story of four Iraqis, but forces us to ask how Europe itself remains captive of its own ideologies, even as it tries to cure others of theirs.

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