

المعادل الموضوعي والرمزية كمعاني لتمثيل الصدمة التاريخية في مسرحية تسعة أجزاء من الرغبة للكاتبة هيدر رافو

Objective Correlative and Symbolism as Means of Representing Historical Trauma in Heather Raffo 's Nine Parts of Desire

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Abstract

Russian formalism, the literary theory that developed in Russia in the early 1920s, considers that without imagery, there is no art. This might go hand in hand with Eliot's theory of "the objective correlative." This paper focuses on how objective correlative, symbols, myths, and narrative combine in Raffo's play *Nine Parts of Desire* help to underscore the major themes and present the characters of nine different women of different ages and professions. The author, during a visit to Iraq, met some women and listened to their real stories which display the terrible reality of being a woman in times of war. Raffo, the learned western woman with Iraqi heritage,

aimed to correct the false negative representation of what has happened in Iraq by the American mass media and to highlight the gap between the one-dimensional media's negative coverage of the war and the true facts of what has happened to the Iraqis. The ordeals of Iraqi women take different dimensions: emotional, economic, social, and personal. Raffo focuses on the Iraqi totalitarian regime and its practices, as well as U.S. military actions and presence and their effect on Iraqi women. The distinctive narratives of the characters mingled with a succession of detached monologues reflect the struggle of Iraqi women to survive in the middle of chaos.

Key words: Suffering, Women, Terrible Reality, Struggle, Trauma.

#### الملخص

طبقاً للمدرسة الشكلية الروسية، وهي النظرية الأدبية التي تطورت في روسيا في أوائل عشرينيات القرن الماضي ، فإنه بدون الصور الأدبية، لا يوجد فن. قد يسير هذا جنباً إلى جنب مع نظرية الأديب تي .اس. إليوت حول "المعادل الموضوعي". يركز هذا البحث على كيفية الجمع بين الارتباطات الموضوعية والرموز والأساطير والسردي في مسرحية رافو "تسعة أجزاء من الرغبة" للتأكيد على المواضيع الرئيسية وتقديم شخصيات تسع نساء من أعمار ومهن مختلفة. التقت المؤلفة خلال زيارة للعراق لبعض النساء واستمعت إلى قصصهن الحقيقية التي تظهر الواقع المرير لكونك امرأة في زمن الحرب. هدفت رافو، المرأة الغربية المثقفة ذات التراث العراقي، إلى تصحيح الصورة السلبية الكاذبة لما حدث في العراق من قبل وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية، وإبراز الفجوة بين التغطية الإعلامية السلبية أحادية البعد للحرب والحقائق الحقيقية لما للعراقيين. تأخذ محن المرأة العراقية أبعاداً مختلفة: عاطفية، واقتصادية، واجتماعية، وشخصية. تركز رافو على النظام الشمولي العراقي وممارساته، بالإضافة إلى العمليات العسكرية الأمريكية ووجودها وتأثيرها على المرأة العراقية. تعكس الروايات المميزة للشخصيات الممتزجة بسلسلة من المونولوجات المنفصلة كفاح المرأة العراقية من أجل البقاء وسط الفوضى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المعاناة، المرأة، الواقع المرعب، الكفاح، الصدمة.

#### 1.1. The Inspiration for Raffo's One-Act Play:

For many years, Iraq has not only maintained its presence within the geographical borders of the nation–state but has also persisted among the various migrant and exile communities scattered across the globe. The essence of Iraq has thrived in the hearts of diaspora Iraqis, shaping their thoughts and perceptions. Feelings of alienation, nostalgia, and melancholy are prevalent and enduring among Iraqis living abroad, whether in neighboring Middle Eastern countries or more distant locations such as Europe, the Americas, Australia, or the Far East. (Al–Ali 14). Those people often reveal a profound sense of sadness. Nevertheless, these diasporic communities also serve as significant wellsprings of optimism, driving political engagement, offering humanitarian and financial support, and fostering creative collaborations. Among those immigrants, Heather Raffo, the Iraqi–American playwright and actress who was raised in the Midwest being a daughter of an Iraqi immigrant, is a recognizable figure.

Heather Raffo wrote *Nine Parts of Desire* after she conducted several interviews with Iraqi women. She visited Iraq a few years after the first Gulf War to see her relatives. In Baghdad, Heather Raffo met her family again, listened to their stories, and saw the horrible destruction all around her. She also met different women and listened to their tragedies. She interviewed those women who trusted her. The interviews cover ten years from 1993 to 2003; hence, the play deals mostly with the consequences of thirty years of Saddam Hussein's repressive regime as well as the suffering of the first (Najjar 46) At the Saddam Art Center, Raffo saw galleries filled with portraits of the dictator. In the same museum, she came across a painting by a woman called Layla Al–Attar. The image of a nude woman clinging to a leafless tree, the sun shining beneath a hazy sky behind her. A U.S. bomb killed the female artist, the curator of the center, and a painter. After Raffo's exploration of painting, she became curious about the artist, as she writes in her author's note that she was affected by it and wanted to tell its story (Raffo 10). Raffo uses the form of

monologue to present her play to give the audience a shocking emotional complexity and to expose the suffering of the Iraqi women depicted.

#### 1.2. The Suffering of Iraqi Women from the Twentieth Century until Resent Time:

The suffering of Iraqi women extended from the twentieth century upward to reach its peak at the time of the Iran–Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War, as well as the years of the economic embargo that followed. Iraqi women faced trauma from several factors, including the horrific destruction of the wars, the oppression of ruthless regimes, and patriarchal values (Eftari 38). Thus, oppression by the rulers, economic sanctions, and three wars had massive effects on Iraqi women.

1.3. The Title of the Play: The title of the play comes from a saying attributed to Imam Ali ibn Abi Taleb (As) that Almighty God has created ten parts of sexual desire and afterward gave nine parts to women and one to men. (Raffo 7). Yet, this saying is cut for it has a complement. The complement is that the greater part of sexual desire given to women by Allah has been counterbalanced by giving them identical parts of shyness (Osman 139) The title of the play also refers to the Australian reporter Geraldine Brooks' *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1996), which is based on the same above saying (Neiprs 156).

1.4. Characters of the Play: The nine characters of the play differ from each other in their religious, social, and educational levels. A group of narratives unites the nine characters into a type of mosaic, but as the play goes on, it breaks into incoherence at the end of the play. (Colleran 73)The play's key character, Layal , is inspired by the artist Layla Al Attar, while the other eight characters are artists, women activists, housewives, doctors, teenagers, mothers, lovers, and mourners (Meerzon 217). The play opens with the first of the nine characters, Mullaya. She is the woman who is hired to lead call–and–response mourning songs at Muslim funerals; Layal is inspired

by the famous Iraqi female artist Layla Al-Attar who was killed by an American air raid; Amal is a jilted Bedouin woman; Huda is a bitter Iraqi exile living in London; The Doctor is a physician working in Basra; the Iraqi Girl is a child who lost her father to Saddam's henchmen; Umm Ghada is a mother in mourning who lost her children during the U.S. bombing of the Amiriyya bomb shelter; The American is a young American woman living in New York City watching the Iraq War on television; and Nanna is an aged woman obliged to sell goods on the street. (Najjar 156). The structure of the play is based on the five Muslim calls to prayer: dawn (fajr), midday (dhuhr), afternoon (asr), sunset (maghrib), and twilight (isha').

1.5. The set design of the play: The set design of the play is divided into three playing areas: a small pool of water signifies a river and the ancient Mesopotamian history of Iraq; an open space invokes an artist's studio, a doctor's office, a child's room, and an expatriate's home; and a path alongside a side wall becomes the site of the bombed Amiriyah shelter (Colleran 89).

#### 1.6. Sadness and Mourning as a Part of Iraqi Culture:

Every year, in the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, millions of Shiites, who form about 60 percent of the Iraqi population, mourn the martyrdom of Imam Husain, the younger grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was slain on the plains of Karbala in 680 C.E. together with his closest family members and followers by the army of the Caliph Yazid, who was the epitome of temporal tyranny, repression, and corruption (Fast 15). The martyrdom of Imam Hussein has held existential importance in a wide variety of Islamic countries. Karbala has left an indelible symbolic mark on devotional practices, and in the transmission of Islamic history, Karbala's tale of martyrdom and suffering is vividly recounted in the Shia commemorative assemblies during the first two months of the Islamic calendar, Muharram and Safar. Imam Hussein's sister, Zainab, who had accompanied Hussain

to Karbala, witnessed the tragedy, took care of the children and women, and was her brother's comrade in spirit. She is recurrently mentioned in the process of mourning (Rizvi 15). Mullaya is a traditionally hired woman who leads call and response with women mourning at a funeral and in the women's gatherings of Muharram to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. It is clear that starting with Mullaya refers to the fact that Iraq, through its history, has faced different sad tragedies because of successive stages of troubled history. The first character to speak is Mullaya. It is an indication of sadness that has characterized Iraq throughout its long history. In Gilgamesh's Epic, we see Gilgamesh in his grief over Enkidu leaving his hair unkempt; he circles the corpse of Enkidu like an animal ( (Routledge 87). Thus, the play opens with the figure of a woman mourner and closes with the figure of a woman street vendor who sells for a pittance the last works of another character, a recently killed artist. This experience of grief and pain is bound not only to the violence of war but also to a particularly gendered experience of poverty, restriction, degradation, and censorship.

1.7. Mullaya and her traditional Iraqi song: Throughout the play, Mullaya, or mourner, appears in two monologues, the first and the second to last, enclosing the rest of the narrative. The play opens with the dawn call to prayer and the introduction of Mullaya, who acts like a spiritual guide. She is reciting a traditional Iraqi song, "Che Mali Wali" ("because I have no man to protect me "). Mullaya is throwing shoes into a river onstage.

Early in the morning/ Early in the morning  
I come to throw dead shoes into the river  
Today the river must eat/ This river is the color of worn soles (Raffo 3)

According to Magda Romanska, Mullaya is looked upon as a symbol rather than a character. Actually, what she mourns is the past, history, and culture of the whole nation (218). Mullaya mourns and warns of the dominant danger that has been

threatening her homeland; "the land between two rivers" that once was "the Garden of Eden." (Raffo 4)

1.8. The connotation behind Throwing Soles in the River: According to Eliot's famous principle of "objective correlative", emotions should be linked to facts in a way that they look important, and in this way, one's emotions can be expressed in the form of art, which is what Raffo does. The throwing of shoes in the river by Mullaya embodies a deep meaning. In her poetic monologue, Mullaya describes the river as the source of life, both at the beginning and the end. Over and over, she uses the word "sole," which, when spoken to an audience, also sounds like "soul." Each call to prayer is complemented by a ritual wash. At the same time, she engages in this ritual, the soles of Mullaya's shoes become conflated with the souls of people whose narratives are encased in this ragged footwear. These rivers have turned out to be "hungry" rivers, which she feeds with "dead shoes and souls". In a striking metaphor, Mullaya describes how the number of the dead in Iraq is increasing every day. The juxtaposition of the "soles" and "souls" of the dead is representative. It looks like Mullaya laments the inappropriate treatment of the dead Iraqi soldiers in the sequential wars that Iraq witnessed. What remains of those soldiers is only their shoes, which reflect their misery, agony, and anguish. There are a lot of 'holes' in those shoes. Holes are one of the prevailing images of the play, which signifies despair, alienation, dilemmas, and hardship.

1.9. Water as a Symbol: Very early in the beginning of the play, we see Mullaya's evocation of the image of the river, the cradle of civilization, when she laments: "Without this river, there would be no here, and here would be no beginning" (Raffo 4). Raffo, in her production notes, argues that the metaphor of the ancient river is both "mythic and functional, a symbol of a life-giving source and the underworld" (Raffo 70). The nine characters are linked and connected through their relationship to

the river. In Mullaya's telling, water plays an important role in the history of Iraq; Mullaya induces the image of the river, the cradle of civilization, when she mourns: "Without this river, there would be no here/ here would be no beginning; it is why I come." (Raffo 3). Mullaya compares the massacres caused by the invasion of "the grandson of Genghis Khan" with the devastation of Iraq by the American army. She says that the grandson of Genghis Khan's grandson made the river run black when he threw all the books in Baghdad into the river. Then she wonders about the color of the river now. Her lyrical prayer uplifts the water into a metaphor, not just of the lost promise of the Garden of Eden ("Where is anything they said there would be?") Mullaya does not believe in the idea of a paradise of martyrs, ("Underneath my country, there is no paradise of martyrs, only water, a great dark sea of desire, and I will feed it my worn sole") (Raffo 6).

#### 1.10. The Abaya and the connotation of the color black:

The Black Cloak (Abaya): refers to the traditional Islamic black cloak worn by women in the Middle East. It is not just a piece of dress; it signifies the clash between tradition and modern life. It is a symbol of cultural identity and modesty that women cope with. The abaya is "a traditional black robe-like garment that has long been worn by both women and men in Iraq" (Raffo 71). As the only actor in a one-woman show, Raffo makes multiple uses of the abaya. All nine characters of the play wear the abaya, and it is used by Raffo to move from one character to another to create a unifying prop to connect these various personas. With this cloth, Raffo can summon the ancient and religious as well as the modern and secular. Her presentations range from a covered Bedouin woman to a sensual artist, from an aged exile to a young child (Colleran 124) The characters that Raffo creates and acts as stand for different locations in the Iraqi cultural landscape and take variable places in American involvement in Iraq. The costumes in the original performances were not



changed, but there was a little difference in how the abaya was worn. It stands for a uniting image that suggests a shared identity with Iraq. Layal wears the abaya not as a traditional garment, to cover the body and head of a Muslim woman. She wears it loosely hanging off her shoulders. Amal , the Bedouin, wears the abaya fastened behind her head as she has been looking for a truthful, affectionate husband (Raffo 6).

#### 1.11. The recurrent theme of the body:

To emphasize the recurring theme of the body, Raffo consistently alludes to it throughout the play, addressing it both directly and indirectly in the contexts of identity portrayal, instances of sexual abuse, mortality, and torment. This underscores the performative aspect of the body. Layal, for instance, declares that our "bodies" are left in emptiness, highlighting a reluctance to depict female nudes and her indifference to accusations of being excessively fixated on her own body (Raffo 7-8). Additionally, Amal recounts her mother's admiration for her body while expressing concerns about its size and obesity. When her potential partner ends their relationship upon seeing her, she attributes it to her body weight. The body motif is further evident in Umm Ghada's narratives about her children's death in the Amiriyya bomb shelter, where the walls are adorned with the hair and skin of the dead (Raffo 30). 1.12.

The most important and main character, Layal:

Layal appears numerous times with added monologues. She addresses the audience, saying that leaving Iraq is not a good choice. She adds that a lot of intellectuals and artists, like her own sister her sister, have left Iraq. During her scenes, she discusses her art, her life, and the situation in Iraq. Ultimately, not having left Iraq, she dies when an American bomb hits her house near the end of the play. Layal plays two different roles with a double identity. She collaborates with the regime, but in the meantime, she has the feeling of being entrapped by the separate

roles she is playing, "being a victim, collaborator, and critic of [her] government." (Romanska 221).

1.13. The connotation of Layal's painting: Layal had the opportunity to paint nude women, "Here my work is well known. Hardly anyone will paint nudes anyway" (Raffo 7). Layal admits that she is unwillingly living an immoral life associated with the sexual doings with the royal family. She exploited her being a victim such as other women's suffering through her paintings. She conveyed her anguish and other victims' through her works. Through her paintings, Layal tries to make the audience realize that she is a victim rather than a cheap woman as they might think. She identifies herself with the stories about other victimized women and says: " These stories are living inside me /each woman I meet her , or I hear about her and I cannot separate myself from them" (Raffo 9) . She immortalized a college female student brutalized by Saddam's son in a painting of a blossom hanging from a branch, unreachable by hungry dogs. Layal admits, "I fear it here / and I love it here/ I cannot stop what I am here/ I am obsessed by it." (Raffo 10).

Amal, a character characterized by her innocence and intense emotions, has experienced the pain of heartbreak through two divorces, leaving her in search of love. She approaches life with sincerity which reminds us of a child. Through her story, she sheds a light on the challenging realities faced by women in Iraq and the broader Middle East. Amal's tale takes us away from the complexities of politics and conflict to delve into deeply personal family matters, such as the struggles of divorce and the social stigma attached to being a second wife. More importantly, it addresses the weight of honor imposed on women by Middle Eastern society. Her insecurities about her body image and self-esteem touch on a universal issue – the way society often judges and values women based on appearance. When the man she loves rejects her, Amal grapples with a deep sense of shame, causing her to question her

self-worth. These are feelings and experiences that many of us can empathize with on some level.

Amal transforms into Huda, an Iraqi exile living in London. She had an internal conflict of being a lifelong political protester while also having a deep-rooted hatred for Saddam Hussein. Huda recounts the torture she endured in one of Saddam's prisons. She finds herself torn because, despite her strong opposition to the Iraq war, she finds herself strangely wanting the war. In Heather Raffo's play "Nine Parts of Desire," the character of Huda takes on a deeply human role, embodying symbolism and representing important themes and experiences related to the Iraq War and Iraqi women. The play through the character of Huda can be emerged as a powerful symbol for showing traumatic experiences. Huda, describes the torture and emotional rape surrounding her, saying: "We could hear things, all night, always rape, / or rape with electronic instruments" (Raffo 52). Through the character of Huda, the audience can connect with the very human impact of the conflict, making the play a deeply relatable and empathetic exploration of these profound themes. She represents the spirit of resistance and protest against the oppressive regime. Huda's conflicted feelings about the Iraq War symbolize the complexity of emotions that many Iraqis experienced during that time. Huda then transforms into "The Doctor ", an educated woman in the United Kingdom who returns to Iraq in order to help her country. She delivers only one monologue and shows anger at the levels of cancer in her patients. As a doctor who has returned to Iraq to work in challenging conditions, she symbolizes the sacrifices made by Iraqi professionals who tried to maintain a sense of normalcy and provide care to their fellow citizens despite the turmoil of war. Her experiences as a doctor dealing with radiation poisoning and the birth of a baby with two heads serves as an objective correlative for the devastating effects of war on the Iraqi population, particularly on children and families. When her husband lost his legs and sit at home jobless, she says "I can't look at him anymore, he is my death

sentence." (Raffo 22). The doctor transforms into an Iraqi girl. This girl is torn between two cultures. She lost her father and did not receive any educational knowledge. The girl was confined in the house to be safe from the fierce events and their effects. The girl used to watch the famous singer N-Sync and the TV presenter Oprah through satellite. She speaks English better than many others. She gets truly enthusiastic about how clever she is at counting bombs, and then she gets really gloomy when she talks about her father. The Iraqi Girl delivers a single monologue in the narrative, where she struggles with the numerous adverse changes in her life. These changes include frequent power outages, being unable to attend school, and her father's arrest by the Iraqi secret police. She also expresses a strong admiration for American soldiers and music. In The Iraqi Girl's monologue, various elements serve as an objective correlative to convey her experiences and emotions. The character's longing for education and the restriction on her ability to go to school represent the loss of opportunities and dreams that many children in Iraq faced due to the political situation. Her father's arrest conveys the fear, guilt, and helplessness that individuals and families felt under the oppressive regime. Her admiration for American soldiers and music, particularly N'SYNC: This reflects her fascination with the outside world, the desire for freedom, and the influence of Western culture on her life. It can be seen as a form of escapism and a symbol of hope for a better future.

The Iraqi Girl transforms into Umm Ghada who is one of the central characters in the play. She is a Bedouin woman who shares her life story, which includes her experiences during the Ba'ath's regime and the Gulf War. Umm Ghada's character represents the resilience and strength of Iraqi women in the face of adversity. Her only monologue reflects the deep connection between the land and the people of Iraq. She went through a life-altering experience as she desperately searched among the charred and lifeless bodies, her efforts ultimately in vain. Umm Ghada is based on actual woman named Fatima who lost her husband and children in the bombing of

Almeria shelter by American forces. She appears in the play to tell audiences about a virtual tour of the bomb site (Najjar 48).

This huge room became an oven, and they pressed to the walls to escape from the flames. In the basement too bombs burst the pipes hot water came up to five feet and boiled the people (Raffo 29–30)

Umm Ghada's survival amidst the devastation has burdened her with an overwhelming sense of guilt, as she grapples with the anguish of outliving her loved ones. Haunted by the memories of that horrific day, she becomes a guardian of the very shelter where the tragedy unfolded, unable to detach herself from its grim history. She discloses to the audience that her entire family killed during the Amiriyya Bomb Shelter bombing in 1991. Following the loss of her daughter, Ghada, she decided to adopt the name Umm Ghada, which translates to "Mother of Tomorrow," in place of her original name. Her tours of the shelter have garnered her some recognition, turning her into a somewhat well-known figure. Upon concluding the tour and sharing her experiences, she invites the audience to sign her book of witness, underscoring one of the central themes of the play. Umm Ghada's character serves as an objective correlative for the deep connection between the people of Iraq and their homeland. Her representation of the land and the environment she describes and cherishes acts as a symbol and trigger for the audience's emotional and psychological response. The objective correlative here is the physical and cultural landscape of Iraq, which evokes a sense of resilience, attachment, and love.

Raffo also provides an Arab American perspective through the character titled only "The American." Who is based on herself. She finds herself deeply absorbed in front



titled "Savagery," which is inspired by a real painting created by Al-Attar, not directly mentioned in the narrative. Nanna concludes the play by revealing to the audience that she is one of the women depicted as a tree in Layal's painting. She then offers to sell this painting to the audience for \$2. The objective correlative, in this case, is Nana's profession and her experiences. She is a symbol of how some Iraqis are survived in spite of the very hard circumstances. The Iraqi Girl delivers a single monologue in the narrative, where she struggles with the numerous adverse changes in her life. These changes include frequent power outages, being unable to attend school, and her father's arrest by the Iraqi secret police. She also expresses a strong admiration for American soldiers and music. In The Iraqi Girl's monologue, various elements serve as an objective correlative to convey her experiences and emotions. The character's longing for education and the restriction on her ability to go to school represent the loss of opportunities and dreams that many children in Iraq faced due to the political situation. Her father's arrest conveys the fear, guilt, and helplessness that individuals and families felt under the oppressive regime. Nanna serves as an epilogue, closing the play and connecting the narrative back to the present moment

## Conclusion

In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo brings to life the voices of nine diverse Iraqi women. The play provides a close and personal glimpse into their lives, each grappling with the challenges posed by cultural norms as well as the emotional trauma resulting from war and feelings of guilt related to their survival. Each woman in the play symbolizes various issues via historical, social, and cultural references.

Through their stories, the play delves into their struggles against patriarchal norms, oppressive political systems, persecution, the devastating impact of war, and the profound emotions of fear and loss. While the play strongly condemns the horrors of war, it also provides a platform for Iraqi women to share their deeply personal experiences, both before and after the era of Al Ba'ath regime. Raffo's work goes beyond merely challenging Western stereotypes of Iraqi women; it warmly invites the audience to explore the details of these women's lives. It paints a vivid and compassionate picture of their circumstances, emphasizing the richness and complexity of their individual journeys and the shared resilience that unites them. The portrayal of Iraqi women is vividly depicted both within Iraq and in diaspora, challenging the prevailing perception of loyal Arab American women. Heather Raffo emerges as a potent advocate for Iraqi women in "9 Parts of Desire," embodying the complex interplay between Iraqi and American identities. While endeavoring to embrace her Iraqi heritage alongside her American identity, she grapples with the stark differences between these two cultures, experiencing a sense of otherness in American society.

An objective correlative in a literary work is a set of objects, events, or situations that represents or symbolizes a character's emotions, thoughts, or experiences. In Heather Raffo's play "Nine Parts of Desire," the stories of the nine Iraqi women collectively symbolize the complex emotions, challenges, and aspirations of Iraqi women in the midst of war and societal shifts. These characters and their narratives serve as a representative reflection of the broader themes and feelings explored in the play, essentially acting as an objective correlative that deepens our understanding of their experiences and the profound effects of war on their lives.



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