

Book Review

Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present by Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali

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Images of Iraqi women are never far from our television screens, often portrayed as victims of war and terror, but never allowed their own coherent voice. In *Iraqi Women* Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali challenges this stereotypical view giving the women of this troubled country the opportunity to share their own experiences.

As Al-Ali interweaves her own personal history with that of the country of her birth and of the many Iraqi women she has encountered, the sense of place and belonging seeps into every page. Through oral histories the women offer recollections of their own lives, reaching beyond the domestic realm, often revealing the central role they played in their country's political struggles.

Al-Ali takes a historical journey from the post-colonial struggle for independence following the Second World War to the present-day toil under allied occupation. In sixty years the people of Iraq have experienced revolution, decades of dictatorial rule, many years of war both with their Persian neighbour and the world's only superpower and her allies, twice, and the harshest sanctions' regime ever enforced. Although Al-Ali is an excellent guide through these historical events this is not just a history book; it offers far more. As Al-Ali combines personal accounts with political insight she weaves a rich tapestry bringing the often-perceived two dimensional Iraq to life. The revolutionary zeal described by many of the women as they recount with passion their own parts played in the Iraq of the 1950s echoes citizens of any number of states around the world at that time desperate to shake off their colonial shackles. In these personal accounts Al-Ali offers a fleeting glimpse of what might have been.

But the optimism of sixty years ago has turned to dust as the daily grind of survival takes its toll on a population forced to endure decades of hardship. Iraqi women, mirroring the rest of Iraqi society, greeted the US-led invasion with mixed sentiments; some were totally opposed and others fervently in support of the move, seeing it as liberation from a tyrant. But even the staunch supporters have seen their hopes and dreams evaporate as the country descends into chaos. Through the personal stories of women still living in fear in Iraq and those who have been able to flee Al-Ali examines the increasingly volatile situation and the impact this has had on the daily lives of Iraqi women. Many women have become virtual prisoners in their homes afraid to leave as the violence and terror escalates and Al-Ali captures their fear and frustration as she relays their experiences of allied bombing, their fear of abductions and sexual violence and their sense of loss, for their families and Iraq.

Although the role of women as central to family life is palpable in their accounts so are their relationships outside the home. Al-Ali examines their political activism, both that sanctioned by the state and women's groups

forced underground by repressive authorities, both after the revolution and during the Ba'th regime. And she charts the role that religion, and its divisions, has played on the lives of ordinary Iraqi women. As the Iraqi women recount their own histories the basic human plight is recorded and in the process the myths and misconceptions challenged time and time again. Al-Ali has gathered personal accounts from Iraqi women not only within the country's borders but also from those scattered throughout the Diaspora, in the Arab world and beyond. Iraqi women became members of the Diaspora in waves as the country lurched from revolution to dictatorship to war. They fled to escape violence or economic hardship and they all have stories to impart. But she acknowledges that her study is not one representative of all the women in Iraq as she interviewed mainly educated urban dwellers and as such could not speak for women struggling in rural areas with little access to education or resources.

Al-Ali's accessible style opens up this world of hardship and courage to a wider audience explaining the historical and political background to the women's stories as she goes along. It is evident that gender and the Middle East are areas of expertise for Al-Ali who is a senior lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Exeter as she narrates with authority. But her humanity is also abundantly clear in this book, a fact not surprising as she is a founding member of Act Together: Women's Action on Iraq and a member of Women in Black. She has recently published *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East* (2000) and *New Approaches to Migration* (2002).