

Survival and Storytelling: Scheherazade and Lutfiya al-Dulaimi's *Saturn Ladies*

Bushra Juhi Jani¹

¹ College of Medicine, Al-Nahrain University, Baghdad, Iraq

Correspondence: Bushra Juhi Jani, College of Medicine, Al-Nahrain University, Baghdad, Iraq.

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Abstract

This essay analyzes Lutfiya al-Dulaimi's novel, *Saturn Ladies*, which explores the trauma, suffering, and difficulties faced by women in war and exile, particularly in Iraq during and after the US-led invasion. The author draws comparisons between the character of Hayat in the novel and Scheherazade from *The Thousand and One Nights*, highlighting the use of storytelling as a means of survival and resistance in the face of violence and oppression. Overall, the essay argues that *Saturn Ladies* revives the legacy of Scheherazade to communicate contemporary events and to keep the country's history alive through storytelling.

Keywords: Scheherazade, story-telling, narrative, survival, testimony

1. Introduction

Scheherazade, the mythical storyteller from *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights* used narrative to save her life and help other women survive. Similarly, the Iraqi author, Lutfiya al-Dulaimi (b. 1939), employs storytelling in her novel, *Saturn Ladies*, to protect threatened lives. This essay examines the influence of Scheherazade on Iraqi female authors, including al-Dulaimi, and analyzes the Scheherazade-inspired elements in *Saturn Ladies*. It also delves into the themes of testimony and trauma in the novel through the lens of literary theories by Spivak, Freud, Brooks, and Foucault.

Female Arab fiction writers, including those from Iraq, are seen as descendants of Scheherazade and use narration to resist oppression. Their works focus on traumatized women and their struggles during Iraq's history of dictatorship, sanctions, occupation, and war, exploring their survival strategies. This "generation" of Iraqi female fiction writers, as referred to by Ikram Masmoudi—there is now a younger generation of women writers because these are pretty old writers—writes from their experiences of being forced into exile due to their country's conflicts (Masmoudi, 2010, p. 60). They aim to create a new representation of Iraqi women through their unique perspectives.

The pioneering voices in Iraqi women's literature include authors Lutfiya al-Dulaimi, Inaam Kachachi (b. 1952), Alia Mamdouh (b. 1944), Maysaloon Hadi (b. 1954) and Hadiya Hussein (b. 1956), among others who forged a new path in Iraqi literature, drawing on the country's rich cultural heritage. In her book, *Iraqis Speak: The Iraqi Tragedy in Women's Writings*, Kachachi compares herself and her fellow Iraqi female authors to the legendary storyteller Scheherazade, who deceived death through her storytelling. According to Masmoudi, "today her granddaughters use almost the same trick: they deceive fate with their narratives and writings which speak more truth than all the bulletins of the world" (qtd in Masmoudi, 2014, p. 26). In "The Iraqi Tragedy, Scheherazade, and Her Granddaughters," Masmoudi explains that this connection to Scheherazade not only solidifies these women's positions as prominent writers, but also places them in the same deadly predicament as the original Scheherazade, represented today by war, sanctions, and banishment (Masmoudi, 2014, p. 26). However, this comparison also presents a challenge for them, and at the same time, indirectly predicts a triumphant outcome (Masmoudi, 2014, p. 27).

Lutfiya al-Dulaimi, the well-known and prolific Iraqi writer, has published numerous works including novels, short stories, play scripts, literary criticisms and translations. Her works have been widely translated into several languages. Her connection with Scheherazade is evident through her own words, as she has clearly stated in various interviews and articles that the legendary storyteller is a significant influence on her writing.

Thus, it can be argued that al-Dulaimi incorporates the spirit of Scheherazade into her female characters as she

believes that storytelling can not only protect one from violence, but can also bring an end to it and serve as a fictional testimony. As al-Dulaimi stated in many interviews, “she takes Scheherazade as an archetype for her female protagonists.”

In her essay, “My Literary Influences,” al-Dulaimi recalls reading *One Thousand and One Nights* as a child. She writes that this book was the first one she encountered that was not a textbook, saying, “*The Thousand and One Nights* was the first book that touched my hands” (al-Dulaimi, 2007, p. 81). Similar to Jorge Luis Borges, who started reading the *Nights* at a young age in secret, al-Dulaimi found the book in a hidden room one summer afternoon and was struck by the idea of “thousands of nights” (Fishburn, 2004, p. 141; al-Dulaimi, 2007, p. 83). Al-Dulaimi recounts, “The nine-year-old girl asked, ‘How could those thousands of nights exist?’ as she embarked on the search for an answer” (al-Dulaimi, 2007, p. 83). The young girl was drawn to the character of Scheherazade, who “risked her life in order to expose the secrets of the king who murdered women.” In her essay on al-Mutanabi Street, where her first book was published, al-Dulaimi recounts discovering the depth of storytelling through *The Thousand and One Nights* as a child. She was then determined to become a contemporary Scheherazade (al-Dulaimi, 2012, p. 16). Scheherazade, according to al-Dulaimi, instructed her to “go to the place of books and become one of those women who narrate stories, one of the daughters of Scheherazade” (al-Dulaimi, 2012, p. 16).

Al-Dulaimi sees a political parallel between herself and Scheherazade. After receiving death threats from extremists in 2006, she has been living in exile. She reflects, “the contemporary tale and the narration of stories would eventually expose me to death at the hands of terrorists” (2012, p. 16). However, she sees the threat as against all creative women and continues to resist by being creative. Al-Dulaimi writes, “the extremists aimed to silence the woman, to decapitate her, [meaning her own], but she escaped death and gave birth instead to another in her series of offspring” (2012, p. 16). By using the imagery of birth, she identifies with Scheherazade, whose tale, according to Adriana Cavarero in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, “not only stops death, but also gains the time to generate life” (1997, p. 123). Thus, both al-Dulaimi and Scheherazade’s tales “proliferate and procreate,” to use Cavarero’s words (1997, p. 127).

In *Saturn Ladies*, Hayat, the protagonist and the storyteller, collects the stories of those around her, particularly a group of women whose tales are recorded in “The Book of Girls.” Each woman’s traumatic experience is narrated in a notebook, highlighting the significance of storytelling in their survival. My essay evaluates how the novel serves as a testimony to the violence the women, including the author, face, emphasizing the connection between their stories and their ability to endure.

Al-Dulaimi utilizes the story of Scheherazade to explore Iraqi realities and issues surrounding women and violence in her writing. In her short story, “Shahrazad and Her Narrators,” Scheherazade returns from the past and wonders, “I saved a few women by telling stories to one murderer long ago, but what about the killers in your time? Who will use their voice to prevent human death?” (2008, p. 38). A man from the present responds, “The world has changed, Princess, storytelling can no longer redeem it” (2008, p. 38). However, al-Dulaimi challenges this viewpoint through her depiction of Scheherazade as a modern woman, who speaks out for herself. Suzanne Gauch asserts in “Liberating Shahrazad” that contemporary Scheherazades should continue to use their voices, stating “*The Nights*’ stories are infinite, and Shahrazad should not fall silent with many rulers still in power” (2007, p. 6).

Al-Dulaimi’s short story primarily addresses the struggles of present-day women living in a patriarchal society, with a focus on calls for women’s rights and liberation. Shakir Mustafa, who edited a collection of contemporary Iraqi fiction, notes that in al-Dulaimi’s story, Scheherazade “crosses worlds and centuries to preserve a feminine perspective against efforts to domesticate it” (2008, p. 18). Salma Khadra Jayyusi, in her anthology of modern Arabic fiction, describes al-Dulaimi as a writer who “depicts the solitude faced by liberated Arab women who have stepped away from traditional roles in Arab society” (2005, p. 261).

Faten Morsy argues in her essay on Scheherazade that depictions of her by contemporary Arab women writers, including al-Dulaimi, “represent the use of Shahrzad as a catalyst for significant social and political change” (2007, p. 234). Scheherazade’s agency and message have inspired al-Dulaimi and other Arab women writers, who saw in her a “prototypical woman that allows Arab women to speak” (1997, p. 40) as noted by Fedwa Malti-Douglas.

In this essay, various literary and cultural references are used to draw parallels between the characters and themes of Scheherazade from *The Thousand and One Nights* and Hayat from Lutfiya al-Dulaimi’s novel, *Saturn Ladies*. The author also draws on the works of scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Julia Kristeva to analyze the novel’s themes of trauma, survival, and storytelling. Therefore, the essay uses a comparative and intertextual

approach to literary analysis, drawing connections between different works and cultural contexts to understand their shared themes and motifs.

2. *Saturn Ladies* and Scheherazade

Al-Dulaimi lived in Iraq until 2006 and experienced the turmoil and violence of several decades. Her latest works delve into the theme of trauma, suffering, and difficulties faced by women in war and exile. Despite not being silenced by violence or exile, al-Dulaimi's novel *Saturn Ladies* shows that Scheherazade and Hayat can no longer speak due to the effects of war and violence after the US-led invasion. The novel depicts a statue of Scheherazade and Shahryar in Abu Nawas Street in central Baghdad, with Scheherazade's "lips closed on the echoes of speech" as she stopped telling stories when the sound of bullets took over (SL, p. 27). The violence of colonization and the loss of sovereignty have masked Scheherazade's voice, leaving her with "no space" to speak (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" p. 307). The destination of Scheherazade's escape is unknown, probably she lives in exile like Al-Dulaimi, her granddaughter.

In *Saturn Ladies*, the references to Scheherazade and *The Thousand and One Nights* continue. The novel opens with Hayat, a present-day version of Scheherazade, waking up from a deep sleep as if she's been "resurrected from a perpetual death" (SL, p. 9). At a time of violence, she is needed to narrate stories once again. She hears the sounds of explosions in Baghdad and feels the effects of hunger, as if she's gone through "one thousand and one days of hunger and thirst" (SL, p. 10). The imagery of the *One Thousand and One Nights* seems to serve contemporary political purposes. Hayat is unable to speak, close to being in a coma. She says, "My tongue was paralyzed, stuck to the roof of my mouth" (SL, p. 11). Hayat's mouth is "dry and stiff" and she cannot narrate her stories orally, but she writes them down like her creator, al-Dulaimi (SL, p. 11). Hayat says she's written "tales of bereavement, suffering from confinement and vanishments, disgrace of castration and amputation of the tongue, and humiliation of the rape of girls" (SL, p. 17).

Hayat occasionally narrates her stories orally, like Scheherazade, but to inanimate objects such as walls, clocks, and mirrors in her basement. She does this "to preserve our stories," as she says (SL, p. 29). Through the character of Hayat, al-Dulaimi revives the legacy of Scheherazade to communicate contemporary events, as she too experienced violence and unrestricted power. The novel explores not only a new war but also the lingering impacts of past wars on individuals, particularly women, who aim to not only survive but also keep their country's history alive through storytelling.

Hayat writes in the novel "I am in the basement recording my story and the story of the city" (SL, p. 189) and describes her words as a flood, saying "I was overwhelmed by a deluge of words in various languages. The language was stifling, like being caught in a raging inferno. The words of fear echoed like drums in Baghdad's space of steel" (SL, p. 91). She states that "stories were pouring on me like an unmanageable flood" (SL, p. 18). This imagery of the overflow of stories is similar to Salman Rushdie's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Hayat's tales lack organization, as she fails to arrange them chronologically (SL, p. 18). The events in her stories are so devastating and chaotic that the line between reality and imagination becomes blurred, as well as the line between the present and past. Hayat ponders "What do I do with familiar contexts and when Baghdad is rolling about in the abyss of fire, blood and madness?" (SL, p. 18) but concludes that the most important thing for her is to narrate the stories as they come to her and record them, saying "I record them and move forward" (SL, p. 18).

The themes of water and the basement in the text are aligned with Julia Kristeva's concept of the pre-semiotic chora. Kristeva describes the semiotic chora as being located in the unconscious, and the basement in the novel symbolizes this unconscious state (Kristeva, 2013, p. 144; al-Ani, 2010). Hayat's writing style is reminiscent of an infant, driven by desires and needs without conscious awareness (Kristeva, 2013, p. 144). She unconsciously seeks refuge in her mother's womb, away from the violence of the outside world. The basement in the novel serves as a Gothic trope, similar to the basement-like prison in Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* where the mother is saved. Hayat refers to the basement as a "women's house," "basement of mirage," "basement of visions and dreams," and a safe haven (SL, pp. 87, 14, 35). The American troops search the house but fail to find the basement, satisfying themselves with what they see on the surface (SL, p. 35). Hayat's self-referential text is recorded as she hides in the basement, similarly to Scheherazade's, creating a form of expression and subversion from oppression.

The themes of a protagonist living in a basement and writing as a form of resistance to societal oppression can be seen in works such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The narrator in *Notes from the Underground* withdraws from society into the underground and similarly, the narrator in *Invisible Man* goes underground to write about his experiences and invisibility. Hayat intends to use her writing to create a mosaic image of the ruin in her city by exploring the stories of the city and its girls across different epochs (SL, p.

19).

Hayat's journey through time mirrors the fantasy world of Scheherazade's stories. Hayat travels to Babylon as a maid and escapes being buried with her mistress. As she travels through history, she avoids similar fates, witnessing historical disasters such as the Mongolian leader Hulagu Khan's sacking of Baghdad in 1258 AD. Hayat wakes up each time in her present-day Baghdad home, now "a complete ruin" (SL, p. 190). Al-Dulaimi uses time travel to comment on contemporary issues, emphasizing the continuity of women's suffering through the ages. The narrator mentions how the hordes of Hulagu and Timur Lang used to create "minarets of skulls" from the heads of the city's residents, including women, and similarly brutal acts continue in modern Iraq, committed not just by American soldiers but also by "ghastly masked men (or extremists)" from the Middle East (SL, p. 30).

Hayat expresses surprise over the vanishing of names in her notebooks, stating that "the events there become interconnected and related to all of us" (SL, p. 17). All individuals within the compilation serve as witnesses to one another's events, with Hayat becoming a witness to all events in the notebooks, leading her to experience "tens of time multiplied fear" (SL, p. 17).

The same fate that befell Hala in Abu Ghraib prison could have happened to me, while Manar and her family's experiences with al-Qaida parallel Rawya's. Luma may have faced a similar situation to Helen. The jailers who mistreated my mother in the 1970s could have done the same to me in the 1990s. The person responsible for executing my brother Majid in 1991 is also responsible for the kidnapping of Fitna, the wife of my uncle, Sheikh Qaydar, and castrating my ex-husband Hazim. (SL, pp. 17–18).

The names of the characters in the novel become insignificant as their experiences are representative of the trauma faced by all Iraqis. Hayat employs a story-within-a-story technique like Scheherazade, allowing the voices of the characters to speak for themselves, while also utilizing self-conscious narration. In an interview, al-Dulaimi stated that the novel aims to "give importance to the feminine will through female narration that is freed from the domination of the male voice" (Ubaid, 2010). The women in the novel strive to create their own destiny, with some succeeding and some failing, but none surrendering (Ubaid, 2010). Al-Dulaimi highlights the resilience of these women, who "move forward without turning back" (Ubaid, 2010). Like "the proto-feminist heroine in Arabic literary tradition, Scheherazade," these characters do not give up (Morsy, 2007, p. 245). And Hayat, like Scheherazade, tries to protect women from male violence and war by offering shelter in the basement of her house to "lonely women." Hala, her mother, Rawya, Manar, and Helen all take refuge in the basement until they are able to leave for Syria or abroad.

Hayat, like Scheherazade, is a storyteller, who says, "A thousand stories are generated every morning...I know that stories are found to numb the pain or calm down the fears of people" (SL, p. 106, 29). Hayat writes her own story, as well as the story of Baghdad and its people, who see her as their "tongue and remaining voice" (SL, p. 49). People, both men and women, ask Hayat to record their stories. In a poignant moment, Hayat encounters a lost boy and tells him a story of thousands of men and women holding books, which, when opened, release their stories into her head (SL, p. 108). These people urge Hayat not to "waste our stories...Carry them and disseminate them in the open so that people hear about what happened to us" (SL, p. 108). Rawya also tells Hayat to record her story in her notebook, so as "not to be forgotten...write it down for us before we die and our stories are folded down" (SL, p. 252). The novel repeatedly emphasizes the need for Hayat's voice to express the pain and hardships of these people.

Rawya informs her friends that they must offer their stories to Hayat to be written down, as a means of survival, connecting the concepts of "soul" and "story" (SL, p. 250). This aligns with the idea in storytelling of prolonging life, as Faten Morsy asserts in her essay on Scheherazade that "storytelling conquers death" (2007, p. 231). Michel Foucault argues in "What is an author?" (1969) that the death of the author does not hinder their stories from living on. A.S. Byatt believes that "stories keep part of us alive," as demonstrated in the *Nights* where "stories are life" (1999). In *Saturn Ladies*, the names, Hayat (meaning "life" in Arabic), and her lover, Naji (meaning "survivor" in Arabic) hold significance for the characters in the novel. Hayat is fighting for survival, saying "life is to avail" and compiling thirty notebooks during the war and sanctions (SL, p. 17). Like Scheherazade, Hayat equates storytelling with life and refuses to surrender to death until finishing her book (SL, p. 51). Both Hayat and Scheherazade will live on "in the endless repetitions of storytelling" (Byatt, 1999).

Lutfiya al-Dulaimi denies *Saturn Ladies* being based on her life, but admits similarities with Hayat (Ubaid, 2010). Like Hayat, she has lived in exile. Al-Dulaimi states in an interview that the novel "resembles" her (Ubaid, 2010). The book is a testimonial novel where women recount their trauma and suffering. The women, who were friends in Baghdad, reunite at a UN refugee center in Amman seeking asylum. Hayat writes about the difficulties

of living in exile and the “pains” of being away from ruined Baghdad (SL, p. 248). Hayat mentions being given pieces of paper by her friends at the refugee center containing their stories, which she narrates as testimonies of their suffering in a male-dominated society, seen as a modern-day Scheherazade. Al-Dulaimi, a descendant of Scheherazade, aims to change the world through the “power of stories” (Bennett, 2012, p. 2).

Hayat in *Saturn Ladies* records the atrocities women face in war to publicize them, as she believes that “narrating stories help us endure the difficulties of time” (SL, pp. 107, 172). Al-Dulaimi, who is influenced by Scheherazade, aims to show how history repeats itself. According to Freud’s theory of the fatalist and devolutionary death plot, repetition in Hayat’s trauma points to a universal trauma that is yet to come, the subject’s own death (Freedman, 2003, p. 7). For Freud and those in mid-twentieth century Europe, death was always traumatic, whereas the idea of a “good death” is now prevalent in Western thought. Thus, in Hayat’s experience, trauma becomes a foundational principle.

Peter Brooks comments that repetition in plot is a movement from passivity to mastery, a choice of an imposed end to overcome death (1977, pp. 286, 292). Hayat is seeking a proper end, like Scheherazade, who embodies the fight against death and extinction. Death appears in the novel as a political threat and patriarchal domination. Brooks analyzes our desire for textual conclusions with Freud’s argument that the meaning of life is in death. Scheherazade and Hayat exploit this by not offering expected endings (1984, p. 104). Brooks reads the sub-plot as preventing the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving an improper death (1984, p. 104).

Al-Dulaimi and Hayat use narrative as a means of resolution, leading to an ending, even if that ending is necessarily incomplete. The fact that they embody storytelling means that the phenomenon will never die, as Scheherazade lives on through endlessly recurrent, yet endlessly elaborated narratives (Brooks, 1984, p. 104). Al-Dulaimi, as the modern Scheherazade, has not replaced the original one, but perpetuates her legacy.

3. Conclusion

In the world of literature, Scheherazade has been revered as one of the most iconic female figures, celebrated for her storytelling skills and her ability to use them as a means of survival. Her legacy has inspired many authors, including al-Dulaimi, to create works of fiction that highlight the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. In *Saturn Ladies*, al-Dulaimi explores the embodiment of Scheherazade in her protagonist, Hayat, and how storytelling serves as a powerful tool in the struggle for survival.

Iraq has been plagued by war and violence for decades, with women often being the most vulnerable victims. They have had to face unimaginable hardships, from the loss of loved ones to the destruction of their homes and communities. Al-Dulaimi’s novel captures the essence of these struggles and gives voice to the women who have been silenced by the chaos of war. Through the character of Hayat, al-Dulaimi showcases the resilience and strength of Iraqi women, and how they use storytelling to cope with their traumatic experiences of war, dictatorship, sanctions and occupation.

Saturn Ladies tells the story of a group of women living in Baghdad during the American invasion of Iraq. The women are from different backgrounds and have faced different challenges, but they share a common bond – the need to survive in a hostile environment. Hayat, takes on the role of Scheherazade, using storytelling as a means of survival. She gathers the stories of the women around her and weaves them into a narrative that reflects their struggles and triumphs.

Through the protagonist’s stories, al-Dulaimi highlights the various socio-political issues that affect women in Iraq. The stories touch on topics such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, forced marriages, and the oppression of women under a patriarchal society. These issues are not limited to Iraq, but they are exacerbated by the ongoing conflict in the country.

The protagonist in *Saturn Ladies* is not only a storyteller but a collector of stories. She listens to the women around her and compiles their experiences into a narrative that reflects the struggles of Iraqi women. This is significant because it shows how the act of storytelling can be a form of resistance. By sharing their stories, the women are able to challenge the dominant narrative of war and violence in Iraq. They are able to create a space where their voices can be heard, and their experiences can be acknowledged.

The use of storytelling as “a strategy of survival” is not a new concept (see Jani, 2021, p. 11). It has been used by women throughout history as a way to cope with the challenges they face. In many cultures, women are the keepers of oral traditions, passing down stories from one generation to the next. These stories are often used to convey important messages and lessons, but they also serve as a means of connecting with others and building a sense of community.

In *Saturn Ladies*, storytelling is not just a means of survival, but a way of creating solidarity among women. The

protagonist's collection of stories brings the women together and allows them to see that they are not alone in their struggles. It shows that their experiences are shared by others and that they are part of a larger community of women fighting for survival. By sharing their stories, the women are able to find strength in each other and to continue their fight for a better future. These pioneering voices are a testament to the resilience and strength of Iraqi women and the important role of storytelling in preserving their voices and history.

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