



# Literary Enigma

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## Genocide as Narrative: The Marginalized Identity in Dunya Mikhail's *The Bird Tatoo*

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### Abstract

Genocide tells the story of the victim and the perpetrator and in narrating this story, the personal and collective experiences of the victim and perpetrator is exposed. This becomes the master narrative. Apart from the victim, perpetrator binary there are many other narratives like, rescuer, foreign agency, families of mixed ethnicity which together form the genocide constellation; with master narrative at the centre. The narrative constellation provides an alternative viewpoint to the single story by showing that the nation story is understood as a network of narratives, in which the dominant narratives are positioned at the centre and challenging narratives are positioned at margins. These marginalised and excluded group resist, appropriate and transform narrative features of genocide master narrative. They develop strategies to position themselves in the master narrative that reframes their past and historic consciousness. Dunya Mikhail's *The Bird Tatoo* narrates both the victim and perpetrator's experiences and its aftermath in the Yazidi genocide by ISIS in 2014. This paper is an attempt to study the genocide as narrative of the marginalized, their identity and changing position on genocide constellation.

**Keywords:** genocide, master narrative, genocide constellation, marginalized identity.

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### Genocide as Narrative: The Marginalized Identity in Dunya Mikhail's *The Bird Tatoo*

Genocide according to UN Genocide Convention is “intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, an ethnic, racial or religious group”. Genocides are tragic events and become genocide only when recognized. The process that leads to their being named, the ways in which they enter history all depends on the power of how it is projected in the public or in simple terms narration.. When mass violence is given the name of genocide a narrative shift occurs in our collective imagination that reframes the meaning of violence and prompts intervention. Anthony Kerby defines narrative as “a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world of experience and ultimately ourselves” Narrative is a story, spoken or written account of connected and interconnected events. It serves some essential functions for human beings such as setting events in chronological order, to tell and facilitate the understanding of events and so on. According to Vintzky Seroussi any narrative can be organized in three frames- the protagonist, the event and the socio political context. Narrative helps in creating and recreating history- personal, communal and national. They are never static they evolve and are dynamic.

However narratives are sometimes intrinsically partial, fragmented and contradictory. In post conflict society the political elite appropriate narrative to form a ‘single story’ by including certain stories and censoring or excluding certain other stories. This single-story function as the master narrative which interprets the past, guide social actions in the present and envisage the future of nation. Narrative constellation provides an alternative to this single story.

Strombom describes the relationship of multiple narratives through “narrative constellation” as “The narrative constellation is an ever-changing processual whole composed of relational parts, and continues a myriad of different concepts organised around narrative themes, which are interrelated”. The narrative constellation provides a network of narration in which dominant narratives are positioned at the centre and challenging narratives at the margins. The genocide master narrative is incomplete without including a group of supporting narratives that connects victims and perpetrator. They can also include non-perpetrator in the perpetrator group, rescuer community, killer group, non-ethnic groups, individuals from mixed ethnic backgrounds, the onlookers, forgotten others and passive participants. Duniya Mikhail's *The Bird Tatoo* is a multigeneric novel set in the backdrop of Yazidi genocide by Islamic Terrorist group ISIS in 2014.

In 2014 the ISIS attacked the Northern part of Iraq and killed more than 3000 Yazidis and almost 7000 were kidnapped. Thousands were tortured suffered inhuman and degrading treatment were held hostage and even forced to convert to Islam. Young boys were separated from their families and trained as ISIS fighters, and women and young girls were raped and sold as sex slaves on Arab markets. *The Bird Tatoo* tells the story of Helen, a yazidi woman who is held captive by ISIS in Northern Iraq. The novel is set in the pastoral context describing nature and the simplicity of Halliqian tribes of Mosul. The qabaj bird, to which the title of the novel refers, is a part of the Halliqians oneness with nature. The bird alongside the fig tree is a symbol of freedom, dignity, prosperity and happiness.

Duniya Mikhail through the character of Helen is conveying yet another perspective of Yazidi genocide and abduction of young women who were raped and sold. It is a testimonial narrative that aims at voicing the unvoiced. Helen's painful journey who escapes ISIS captivity but unable to reunite with Elias her husband is portrayed in the novel. It is an eyewitness to what is inflicted upon Halliqi.

She witnessed the massacre as if it were in front of her TV. Men thrown into ditches and shot. Boys without shirts lined up with their hands raised, and the organization members checking them, ordering those who had grown hair under their armpits to join the camps. Others who had no hair yet departed with their mothers to

the guests place while they were prepared for sale.(36)

Duniya Mikhail herself explains about the novel as “Before I began writing the novel, I went on a field trip. I visited villages in Northern Iraq after being away from the country for over twenty years. I visited refugee camps, location of mass graves, Lalish Temple and met with women who had recently fled ISIS capture. This was a difficult experience for me psychologically speaking and listening to women’s heart breaking stories and then describing feelings of indignity after being sold at the market like merchandise. However I feel that if I did not interact this would have been even harder experience. Their pains were not mere clouds, I would let pass go about my business as usual. Only pure literary art can enable us to turn tragedy into a form of beauty. When we achieve this, our characters succeed in attracting the world attention. My writings in general, whether it be prose or verse, focus on human fragility and those little issues which cast the largest shadow. I tried in *The Bird Tatoo* to focus on those large shadows. (Arabic Fiction Prize, 2021)

Mikhail describes the city of Mosul in the aftermath of ISIS occupation.

The city of Mosul looked pale, silent and slow as never before.

There were no crowds or loud music coming from the shops. Black flags had replaced neon advertisements. Even the Tigris River flowing under the bridge, looked completely destroyed and oblivious of everything going on above it. (12)

Mikhail presents in a fictitious form the testimonial documents of women who been held captive by ISIS. The scene was the women who are mass raped collectively scream which manifest the resilience of women who are unvoiced and helpless. Soldiers in Daesh (ISIS) in response are

Shocked by the collective reaction, the men beat the women with all their might. But eventually the room fell quiet, and the men seemed exhausted from all the beating and probably felt shame....the captives exchanged looks of encouragement, as if they were patting each other’s shoulders, although that would hurt with all bruises they now bore. Some of these women could not move for several days.(5)

Screaming and shouting is a motif employed by Mikhail to indicate the voice of the voiceless. Breaking the silence and singing which indicates freedom is shown through the character of Ghazal. For a long time, her mouth is like “a solitary confinement room in which the words had been trapped” (232)

Mikhail blurs fact and fiction and captures the spirit and details of two different periods before and after ISIS attack. The novelist is able to provide the social, political, religious and cultural background of the city of Iraq. The Daesh’s obligatory rule of how men and women should behave in the society is portrayed through the fictional character of Ayash.

“Men left their beards unshaven and women wore sharia attire. He imposed fines on anyone selling Western clothes, especially T-shirts with foreign words on them. If he saw a boy wearing trousers that did not fall slightly above his ankle, he would punish the boy’s parents specifically his father, with twenty lashes” (28)

Power relations and objectification of female body and sexual objectification are captured in the novel through the character of Helen. Her helplessness when she is called as number “Twenty seven” instead of her name is a type of objectification degrading her individuality. Butchering women and women reduced to specific body parts for sexual pleasure is a recurring motif in the novel. The female body is perceived by Daesh as an assemblage of distinct components devoid of emotion and cognition. Whenever a woman is sold her teeth, mouth and smell are all checked as to make a deal about her price. Rehna one of the captivated members in the novel is given for free to do domestic works as she is fifty years old. Helen’s price “started at seventy five dollars because she was in her thirties”. (4)

The novel is a binary of pain and beauty. The novelist is able to juxtapose the past and the present, primitive and the modern and freedom and captivity. Everything is weaved together to symbolize the uncomprehend reality of life. All characters speak about themselves and their tragedies and their version of life. The multiple perspectives of multiple characters provide different narratives of Yazidi Genocide. The story of one does not erase the story of others and this focus on the narrative of constellation.

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