

GHARBI M. MUSTAFA

**Kurdish Identity in Samīr Naqqāš's.
*Shlomo al-Kurdī, wa-anā wa-az-zamān***

Abstract

The article examines the themes of uprooting and the complexities of identity quest as they appear in Samīr Naqqāš's¹ novel *Shlomo Al-Kurdī, Myself and Time*.² It analyses the extent to which the experiences of exile and displacement influence the formation of the characters' identity and undermine the notion of belonging. The study strives to explore biographical aspects, in which the author's own background and personal traits assume an overbearing impact on the themes found in his novel. I argue that both the writer and his protagonist live in exile and seek identity, first the author through the act of writing in Arabic language, whereas his protagonist does so by retaining his Kurdish surname. The relationship between exile and memory is approached, in which the author and his protagonist endeavor to preserve their memory in the face of the tension posed by the experience of separation from their native lands. Similarly, they had undertaken narratives of harsh journeys on account of political and economic compulsions to some new strange lands, where they long for an image of home they have left behind.

1. Introduction

The search for our roots, for who we are, has been a dominant feature of twentieth century and new millennium societies and their literature. The quest for identity has engaged the imagination of many writers in the course of literary history, either because they were forced to leave their native country for political or economic reasons, or

¹ A prominent Israeli-Arab writer, who was born into Iraqi Jewish family in 1938. Naqqāš along with his family were transported to Israel in 1951.

² Samīr Naqqāš, *Shlomo al-Kurdī wa-anā wa-az-zamān* ("Shlomo Al-Kurdī, Myself and Time"), Manshurat Aljamal, Cologne 2004.

because they felt estrangement within their society and willfully chose to live elsewhere. Many scholars have examined the argument of identity in literary narratives, linking a writer's treatment of that theme with the writer's own condition. 'Identity' can be defined in many ways; social scientists employ the term in a variety of ways "to explain a multiplicity of phenomena, some vocabularies such as: identity crisis, finding yourself, self-actualization, etc. is used for the search for identity."³ The concept of Identity cannot be separated from the culture(s) and environment which build and structure it. In other words, "we form our identity by selecting values, beliefs, and concepts that better define our sense of self."⁴ In this sense, "the identity of the individual develops and shapes up across one's lifetime beginning with a young child's awareness of significant others and an initial sense of self and extending to the older adults' summation, integration and evaluation of one's life accomplishments."⁵ Accordingly, identity as a broad term can be a "description of the general aspects of the individual's total personality – that is, the establishment, assimilation, or integration of, for example, societal norms, values, beliefs, and standards. Identity is determined by, interpersonal, and environmental characteristics, and interactions of significant components of an individual's unique world."⁶

Thus far, too little attention has been paid to the work of Iraqi Jewish⁷ writers who contributed to cultural and literary life in Iraq. Berg claims that "in no other Arab country, it appears, did Jews reach such a high level of literary creativity in Arabic."⁸ These writers found themselves exiled from their traditional place in the years leading up to the mass exodus of Jews from Iraq. They were uprooted and replanted in Israel, where many deemed their culture inferior and continued to long for a home they had left behind. In their writings they explored the opposition of home and exile in its many facets, including the historical and political process. Therefore, the theme of exile and the search for identity plays a complex and central role in their literary works and highlights the hardships of coping with the new culture in Israel. Their departure from Iraq "signaled the end of the oldest Jewish community in the Diaspora; their arrival in

³ R.F. Baumeister, *Identity: Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 143.

⁴ G.R. Adams, T.P. Gullotta, & R. Montemayor (eds.), *Adolescent identity formation*, Sage, Newbury Park Ca, 1992, p. 02.

⁵ E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Norton 1963, p. 257.

⁶ U. Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of human development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1979, p. 82.

⁷ Iraqi Jews are Jews born in Iraq or of Iraqi heritage. The history of the Jews in Iraq is documented from the time of the Babylonian captivity c. 800 BCE. Iraqi Jews constitute one of the world's oldest and most historically significant Jewish communities. From the Persian Sassanid period in the 2nd century CE to the rise of the Islamic caliphate, the Jewish community of Babylon thrived as the center of Jewish learning. The Mongol invasion in the middle Ages led to its decline. Under the Ottoman Empire the Jews of Iraq fared better. In the 20th century, Iraqi Jews played an important role in the early days of the Iraq's independence, but the Iraqi Jewish community, numbered at around 120,000 in 1948, almost entirely left the country due to persecution following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

⁸ N.E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996, p. 29.

Israel came at the beginning of a new nation.”⁹ It is worth noting that the first short story ever published in Iraq was written by the Jewish Iraqi author Murād Miḥā’īl, followed by pioneers of the short story form, such as Anwār Ša’ūl, Ya’qūb Bulbul, and Šallūm Darwīš. These writers, who tried to avoid ethnic markers while making no attempt to hide their Jewish identity, formed part of the literary heritage that Iraqi-born Jews brought to Israel with them.

Arriving in Israel, they had the choice of either adapting to a new language, Hebrew, or continuing to write in their native language in a foreign cultural and linguistic environment: “The writer exiled to a different linguistic environment is faced with choice of holding onto the familiar or venturing forth to a new language.”¹⁰ Although many of these writers chose Hebrew, some others, including Samīr Naqqāš chose to write exclusively in Arabic. The young Naqqāš received a Hebrew education, yet his stories, subsequent novels and plays are defiantly written only in his mother tongue: Arabic. Naqqāš himself rejects the ideological basis of Israeli identity by claiming that he is in exile from Iraq and declares his alienation from his surroundings in Israel. He defies the dominant linguistic and cultural milieu in Israel in order to maintain his Iraqi identity. His literary works depict a fascinating portrait of the deep and enormously complex Arab-Jewish identity; all his subjects felt profoundly connected with the country in which he was born and the struggle with the growing gap between his memories of the progressive, multi-religious movements of his youth and the grim realities of present-day life in Israel. Naqqāš uses the Arabic language to insist on an identity that has been rendered impossible by the logic of the State of Israel. He spent the greatest part of his life writing about his exile from Baghdad.

In his last work, *Shlomo al-Kurdī wa-anā wa-az-zamān* published just before his death in 2004, the main character’s complex identity is especially prominent. A Kurdish Jew¹¹ from the city of Sāblāḡ¹² in Iranian Kurdistan, who “recalled the main episodes in a life that spanned Asia Minor, from the Kurdish city of Sablagh to Tehran and Baghdad, as well as trips (he was a merchant) to Moscow and Bombay; and traversed the century, from the First World War to the 1980s’ present.”¹³ This paper will attempt to delineate the characteristics of Kurdish identity as they appear in the novel. I argue that both the author and his protagonist live in a world of exile and maintain their identity

⁹ Ibid., p. XIII.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹ Kurdish Jews or Jews of Kurdistan (are ancient Jewish communities inhabiting the region known as Kurdistan, roughly covering parts of Iran, northern Iraq, Armenia, Syria and eastern Turkey. The history of Judaism in Kurdistan is ancient. The *Talmud* holds that Jewish deportees were settled in Kurdistan 2800 years ago by the Assyrian king Salmanasar III (r. 858–824 BC). Their clothing and culture are similar to that of the Kurds. In general, the native language of the Jews of Kurdistan was neither Arabic – like most Iraqi Jews – nor Kurdish. Instead, the Jews (and Christians) of Kurdistan spoke dialects of Aramaic – a Semitic language, close to Hebrew. Almost the entire Kurdish Jewish community, the majority from northern Iraq, was airlifted to Israel in 1951.

¹² Sāblāḡ – also transcribed as Sāwḡ Bulāq; present-day Mahābād, a Kurdish city in northwest Iran – is best known historically as the site where the People’s Republic of Kurdistan was first declared in 1946.

¹³ N. Hawker, *Mizrahi Wanderings*, “New Left Review” 25, January–February 2004, pp. 153–160.

to overcome the feelings of discrimination and alienation they encounter in their new homelands. In the first part, the paper traces the author's life, stressing his dilemmas of exile and identity. The main issue addressed is the author's persistent struggle to retain his Arabic cultural identity through his insistence to write in the Arabic language while living in Israel. Similarly, in the second part, the focus will shift to explore the protagonist's incessant endeavors to establish his Kurdish identity all through his long years of exile. This paper will attempt to point out the links between the author and his hero in respect of their quest for establishing their identity. The author uses his Arabic language for shaping his identity, whereas his protagonist does so by his tenacity to be referred to as Shlomo al-Kurdī (Shlomo, the Kurd) as the title of the book suggests. Such a quest can be observed in the emergence of fervent nostalgia generated by the author and his protagonist for the image of the past as homeland and ultimately to return to it. Hence, this in time, gives rise to the denial of the realities of a new life.

2. The Author's Identity

"Soon the sun sets, as the caravan proceeds deeper into the road; darkness falls around, the wagons are swallowed by the unknown. Their dream is to pursue their lives in another country. Their rulers have not protected them, nor have they prevented them the agonies of exile. They fled, taking with them their junk, junk... my distant beloved Sāblāg... and so, Sāblāg, that's what we became, junk! At night the colour of the raven covers the world and the fleeing caravans scurry forward in the darkness toward western borders. The people have already lost their identity... They scamper across the land of their ancestors, swallowed by the night. Shortly they will be swallowed by the lands of another strange country, to become a group of impoverished immigrants, refugees."¹⁴

The passage from Naqqāš's work could serve as a most appropriate introduction to his life and a foreword to his novel. His Arab-Jewish identity – which became a divided one, containing two nationalities – drew him in his works to deal with characters with complicated identities. A Jew born in Iraq, he spent years trying to leave Israel to escape discrimination against *Mizrahi*.¹⁵ He never felt at home in Israel and left several times for Iran, India, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and finally for England but he was always disappointed and returned to Israel: "I don't exist in this country, not as a writer, a citizen nor human being. I don't feel that I belong anywhere, not since my roots were torn from the ground."¹⁶ He was unable to embrace his new de-facto reality in Israel and continued

¹⁴ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 112.

¹⁵ *Mizrahi* Jews or *Mizrahim*, ("Easterners"), also referred to as *Edot HaMizrah* (Communities of the East) are Jews descended from the Jewish communities of the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and the Caucasus. included in the *Mizrahi* category are non-Sephardic Jews from the Arab world, as well as other communities including the Gruzim (Georgian Jews), Persian Jews, Bukharan Jews, Mountain Jews, Iraqi Jews (including the Baghdadi Jews of India), Kurdish Jews, and Yemenite Jews among various others.

¹⁶ S. Naqqāš, quoted in N.E. Berg, op. cit., p. 5.

to adhere to his Iraqi-Arab nationality, as he declares: "I have arrived in Israel at the age of thirteen, and following my father's steps, I have left it after fifty years as a genuine Arab; should I ever be compelled to return to it, I would still remain that Iraqi-Arab who is loyal to its language and heritage."¹⁷ Naqqāš wrote about the struggle of Arab Jews to adapt themselves to life in Israel; he wrote of relations among Muslims, Jews and Christians in Iraq, and his work has been widely published in the Arab world. He is probably the ultimate case of a writer living on the margins.

His masterpieces were those stories and novels in which he described with great nostalgia, his happy family life during his childhood in Baghdad, its feasts, holidays, rituals and folklore. He considered the great wave of emigration to Israel, a forced expulsion from the paradise of his childhood in Baghdad. He describes his last moments leaving Baghdad as his eyes catch the view of the Tigris for the last time: "As I was passing by the Tigris, I was trying to satisfy my eyes with the image of the river, how extraordinary a spectacle! Where one can see the reflection of street lights on both sides. This view is stuck in my mind forever."¹⁸ Naqqāš wrote in the colloquial dialect of the Iraqi Jews that is dominated by standard literary Arabic along with various Iraqi colloquial dialects mainly those of the Muslim majority and Christians. However, the use of the Jewish Baghdadi dialect is the distinguishing characteristic of Naqqāš's work. He is considered one of the few writers who employ the dialect in fiction: "As far as my writing goes, of course I've been here even though I don't feel within my spirit as if I live here. I live either with the hope to leave or to travel. I started to use the dialects of Iraqi Jews and Muslims, and this is something that no one had even attempted before. At that time, I wasn't even thinking that I was setting down dialects that were in the process of being forgotten."¹⁹

He developed a genuine Arabic style with allusions to Jewish and Muslim history, proverbs, idioms, folklore and cultures. In this way, he was able to characterize his heroes and provide a social, cultural and genuine environment to his dialogues. On the other hand, Israeli literary circles puzzle over Naqqāš's refusal to write in Hebrew – a question to which he himself replied: "I don't think it's possible to write in a language that was taught to you at the age of twenty or either twenty-five nor do I think it is a wise thing to attempt. Naturally, I prefer the language that I can express myself best in... A Jew who writes in Arabic presents all kinds of problems to everyone yet I am simply continuing to write in my own language."²⁰

The dominant cultural paradigm of the Israeli state only allowed for Israeli literature in Hebrew and negated the existence of Arabic Jewish literature. On the other hand, his reception in the Arab world has also been guarded. The reason according to Reuven Snir is that both "the Muslim-Arabic and the Jewish-Zionist canons, rejected hybrid

¹⁷ *Signs in the great disorder: an interview with Samir Naqqash*, in: *Keys to the Garden, New Israeli Writing*, Edited by Ammiel Alcalay, City Lights Books, San Francisco 1996, pp. 100–132.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–160.

Arabic-Jewish identities like foreign bodies, now playing a so-called 'pure' Jewish-Zionist identity off against a 'pure' Arabic-Muslim one."²¹ Naqqāš himself acknowledges the fact that he is paying the price of his insistence not to write in Hebrew: "I feel discriminated against for a number of reasons: First, a Jew writing in Arabic is not read in Israel and gets no institutional support from the literary establishment. Second, the general attitude towards a writer like me is not positive. The question always looms in the background: why should a Jew write in Arabic?"²²

3. The Protagonist's Kurdish Identity

Throughout history, the Kurdish-Jewish identity existed along with other Jewish identities such as American-Jewish and Arab-Jewish. It was for a long period of time the identity of Jews living in different partitions of Kurdistan. As Kurdish Jews, while retaining a collective identity, they were generally well integrated and indigenous to the communities they lived with, forming an inseparable part of their social and cultural life. The title of the book, *Shlomo al-Kurdī* ("Shlomo, the Kurd") provides a clear signal of the hero's self-perception. His Kurdish identity is shaped as much by his cultural heritage and his birth in Sāblāḡ into a Jewish family. The novel recounts the experiences of the main character, an elderly Kurdish Jew, who lives in Ramat Gan,²³ where he devotes himself to his memories: "Here, in Ramat Gan, is the end of my trips"²⁴ says Shlomo. The year is 1985; a dying man sees his entire life flash before him: "lying in bed, an old man awaiting with content and submission my ferocious enemy, whom I have, outmaneuvered a thousand times."²⁵

Following "a true postmodern style, *Shlomo al-Kurdī* begins at the end; but the themes and feelings of the novel are unfashionably historicized."²⁶ Towards the conclusion of the opening section, Shlomo begins to recall memories of his youth, living in Sāblāḡ, in an exchange with the narrator. With a trembling hand, Al-Kurdī offers him a plate of bananas and apples: "Remember, my youth, try to! And eat another banana or apple. This remained the land of oranges."²⁷ In Sāblāḡ, they did not come in such quantities. Sāblāḡ, its hills and valleys, where walnuts, acorns and pines grew."²⁸ The temporal distance separating Shlomo from the world of his youth is reinforced by his physical removal from his Kurdish town of Sāblāḡ that is his subject. His location in Israel and the other places is an incarnation of his painful exile from Sāblāḡ, where he cherishes an emotional attachment to the town. Moreover, Shlomo calls upon time to share the

²¹ Reuven Snir, is a lecturer in Arabic literature at the University of Haifa.

²² *Signs...*, op. cit., pp. 100–132.

²³ A quarter in the suburb of Tel Aviv.

²⁴ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁶ N. Hawker, op. cit., pp. 153–160.

²⁷ The term refers to Israel.

²⁸ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 35.

narration of the events, both as a partner and a witness, along with the narrator, so the three can collaborate in retelling the story “Time, you and me, let’s remember together”²⁹ and as the title of the books also suggests.

The year is 1914. The plot unfolds with the young Jewish merchant Kattānī’s³⁰ marriage to a local girl, Asmar in Sāblāḡ, a peaceful place where Muslims, Christians and Jews have coexisted for long time. Soon after, Kattānī departs on a trade trip to Moscow with his Kurdish business partner, Abū Muḥammad. Surprisingly, upon his return, he falls in love with Esther, the beautiful fifteen-year-old daughter of another Jewish merchant. However, in the morning after his wedding night with Esther a messenger arrives from Teheran, calling upon Kattānī to an audience with the Shah of Persia. The three-day trip to Teheran is filled with hazards; Kattānī is set upon by a band of rebellious Kurdish tribesmen, but was set free, once they recognize him as a Sāblāḡi Jew, a Kurd like themselves. The attitude of his fellow Kurds yields a striking sentiment on Kattānī’s part. Likewise, he shows the similar feelings and devotion to his community when asked in the audience of the Shah if he has any contacts with the Kurdish rebels. The Kurds, his Majesty warns, are preparing for revolution. Kattānī denies this strongly.

Soon afterwards the war breaks out and the conflicting armies begin to arrive in Sāblāḡ, first the Russians then the Ottomans and eventually the British: “Sāblāḡ, the beautiful ‘Mahābād’ becomes a strategic site for its struggling neighbors.”³¹ Shlomo is the translator when the Sāblāḡ notables are summoned to the Russian Consul’s residence, and the only one to understand His Excellency’s speech: “People of Sablagh! The Tsar’s army has entered your town in order to protect you and defend you against the Ottomans and their German allies. We will not hurt you nor your town, so go on with your work and do not pay attention to what is not your business. Woe upon the one who puts himself in the way of the army of the holy Tsar, and who helps his enemies.”³²

Consequently, violence erupts all over the area and mass killings and ethnic cleansing continue in the city along with the war – the Russians killing the Muslims and the Ottomans killing Jews and Christians as Shlomo describes: “My gulp of air froze in my lungs, as I was gaping at the dead bodies piled on the yard, staring at the slaughtered faces. All people from Sāblāḡ without any exception, my Muslim brothers... this is Faḍil, my friend from childhood among the dead... This is Zuhdī, the famous merchant who was my companion in one of my last trips... this... and those... women, children... twenty... fifty... sixty... around one hundred people of Sablagh.”³³

The war has reached a new stage of intensity, with the Ottomans army, under Enver Pasha sweeping eastward across the region, urging Kurds to take their revenge on the Armenians. Stories of the massacres reach Sāblāḡ. The Russians evacuate the city and, in 1916, the Ottomans arrive. Worried, Kattānī discusses the situation with Abū Muḥammad,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁰ Kattānī is Shlomo’s Jewish family name.

³¹ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 140.

³² Translation quoted in Nancy Hawker, op. cit., pp. 153–160.

³³ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 80.

who is reassuring: "This craziness will pass. On the contrary, as Kattani – and the narrator – are about to realize, the 'lunacy of the world' has just begun."³⁴ Notwithstanding the imminent danger, Shlomo is determined to stay: "All are fleeing Sāblāg, they have all suffered a great deal, and I have suffered the most. I wonder, if anyone who abandons his home land is a coward? If anyone who deserts his birth place is a traitor?"³⁵

Now, Kattānī and his large family have to survive the famine descending on this formally affluent area. The situation has further deteriorated, when fifteen Jews (the Rabbi among them) and twenty-three Christians are killed by Ottoman troops. Turmoil and tension increasingly mounts among the Jews of the town: "We have been asked to be Russians, Ottomans, Persians and Azeris. But we are Hebrews declares a speaker at a meeting of the town's Jews to discuss the crisis. Kattani's muttered objection is stubborn: We are Sablaghis, Jewish Kurds."³⁶ Kattānī feels in part as a Kurd, even though he keeps his Jewish identity: he sees the Kurdish-Jewish identity as a possibility. This identity exists within him; he is Shlomo, the Kurd, in the face of all the hardships, tragedies and challenges he encounters throughout his life. He defies the time: "Up to this moment, I am still Shlomo, the Kurd as I have been all my life."³⁷ Furthermore, he admits that he retains one of the characteristics of a Kurdish character. He says of himself, "I am stubborn Kurd."³⁸ Much as Kattānī desires to stay, he is eventually compelled to yield to various pressures, one of which is the savage murder of his wife Esther and her two children by Ottoman soldiers. Moreover, a messenger from Teheran arrives and warns him that the Shah of Persia has charged all Jews with high treason; thus he has decreed that all of them have to face capital punishment: "The Shah accuses you and the other Jews of Sablagh of collaborating with strangers. Hence, you are all sentenced to death; a death squad is already dispatched, that will soon arrive to implement the verdict upon you. You and your family are in the top of the list."³⁹

Utter poverty and fear for their lives drive most of the Jewish families toward the western boarders seeking shelter and protection in new lands. With a trembling hand, Kattānī entrusts the keys to his house and business to Abū Muḥammad, packs up the family possessions and is eventually obliged to depart with the Kurdish-Jewish caravan to Baghdad. The family now arrives in Baghdad where they settle in a small damp grimy house, in contrast with their cozy large Sāblaāgī home, with its courtyard and fountain. As Kattānī, known now as Shlomo Al-Kurdī, describes it: "A small house in a narrow alley, where no sun beams can reach, filled with rot and corrosion, away from any breeze. Full of sewage and drainage smells; an ally forgotten by God and His people, packed with our likes, despised immigrants."⁴⁰ Moreover, the only job he can obtain is cleaning

³⁴ Quoted in N. Hawker, op. cit., pp. 153–160.

³⁵ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 346.

³⁶ N. Hawker, op. cit., pp. 153–160.

³⁷ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

toilets at the British army camps. Seeing the decline in their life style, his faithful wife, Asmar, decides to hand over her jewelry to her husband.⁴¹ Shlomo Al-Kurdī, decides to make a trip to Bombay in 1924, to seek some trading possibilities. On board the ship, the clash of identity becomes evident as the protagonist describes his growing alienation and estrangement traveling with a group of mixed nationalities: "If I am to speak, then things might get complicated; a stumbling, nasal, hybrid, Kurdish Jew, Persian and Baghdadi traveling to India. Me! That's all what I am. I am, the unique Sindbād of the early twentieth century. How is it then I have lost my tongue, and all the languages I came to know turned into screams of a dumb monkey."⁴²

Ultimately, his business flourishes and he becomes one of Baghdad's famous merchants specializing in the second hand clothing trade. He purchases a new house in Karrāda Aṣ-Ṣarqīyya,⁴³ has a new large shop furnished with Persian carpets. However, he wants the people of Baghdad, to know it was, Shlomo, the Kurdish immigrant, and not Shlomo Kattānī, or Shlomo, the Jew who has achieved this.

"The golden letters of Shlomo, Al-Kurdī's name were glittering on my storeroom in the Baghdad market. I have ignored my family's name, seeing that I wanted everyone to know, it was the Kurdish refugee and immigrant, who was the first to initiate the second hand clothes business in Iraq. Still, I wonder!, would the people ignore this fact if had written Shlomo Kattānī al-Kurdī?"⁴⁴

Succeeding in his business and being a good example, he attempts to rectify some misconceptions which the people of Baghdad have about the Kurds. "Yes, Shlomo Al-Kurdī and not Kattānī, as a stubborn Kurd, I insisted. The name people uttered with admiration, since it was a symbol of many qualities which they would like to acquire and an example to follow, such as struggle, successes, good reputation and honesty. An aura which would erase misconceptions rooted on people's minds about the Kurds and wipe out all delusions about the Kurdish character. We did not have such prejudice in Sāblāḡ, but it was born here in a filthy Baghdadi immigrants' neighborhood... Do you understand then, this insistence on the name Shlomo Al-Kurdī?"⁴⁵

However, this does not last long. Soon people vent their rage on local Jews in the attack known as *Farhūd* in 1941⁴⁶, where random killing and property looting took

⁴¹ In a Kurdish tradition, as part of marriage requirements, the bridegroom has to present the bride a certain amount of jewelry which becomes the wife's property. The husband has no right to sell them, unless they are offered to him by the wife, in hard times.

⁴² Ibid., p. 128.

⁴³ A sophisticated quarter in Baghdad.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 132.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁶ After the defeat of Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī's pro-Nazi coup and his flight from Baghdad on 1 and 2 June 1941, Jewish life and property were attacked in what came to be called in Baghdad the *Farhūd*. The looting was started by Iraqi soldiers who had been allowed to roam the streets of Baghdad carrying their weapons. The looting and killing had continued for two days while the British army sat on the outskirts of the city, prevented from intervening by order of the British ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis. Hundreds of houses and businesses were looted. Accounts vary from 120 Jews being killed to more than 600; 2,118 were injured; and more than 12,000 lost part or all of their properties.

place. History repeats itself; what had happened in “Sablagh is reoccurring in Baghdad, the British are departing, saying to the Nazis, here it is,”⁴⁷ Alkurdi tells his wife, Asmar shortly before she is fatally stabbed in the streets of Baghdad. This is one of the two times that the ‘stubborn Kurd’ has ever cried in his life; the first was when he lost his second wife and his two sons, and now he cries over losing his faithful wife. The events are depicted in the novel in Shlomo’s words: “I see women, men, old men, children being slaughtered, houses being robbed, shops being emptied, girls being raped, streams of blood flowing on the streets, while the mobs dance merrily over the dead bodies, waving their blood stained daggers and swords.”⁴⁸

Shortly after this, in 1948, the Israel-Arab war breaks out. Iraq participated in the war and martial law was declared. This marks the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the Jewish community. Blackmail, threats and arrests become commonplace. Now, Solomon’s children opt for denaturalization and the airlift to Israel, but Al-Kurdī cannot bear to go with them. Iraqi officers arrive as he sits sipping coffee in his shop in the now deserted Jewish quarter. The Kurd is now an Iranian in the eyes of the authorities, and must be forcibly deported to Teheran. In his drunken musings there, “he dreams of returning to reclaim his business in Baghdad. Events conspire against him once more, however, and he ends up in Israel – a Jew forced to wander.”⁴⁹ An old man, he looks back on his life from, his apartment in Ramat Gan. Yet the memories of his walled-and-gated city built of reddish stone, surrounded by hills of walnuts, oaks and pines are still vivid “No, I will not forget Sāblāg, my beloved Imāmabād, despite, the prosperity of Baghdad, Bombay the source of wealth, and Teheran the refuge.”⁵⁰

4. Conclusion

The novel discussed is not classified as an autobiographical one, but as part of an attempt towards self-definition of the writer’s own Iraqi national identity as compared to the Jewish one and as exposing the trauma of uprooting from his natural milieu to a different home. Naqqāš tells the story of a Kurdish Jew and by describing his protagonist’s dilemmas and misfortunes; he conducts an inner enquiry into his own dilemmas and misfortunes. They are both brutally initiated into the realities of war, exile and the complexity of identity search. The writer’s choice of Arabic would appear to have been made due to his attachment to his mother tongue and what the writer perceives as his inability to replicate these ties. Similarly, Al-Kurdī was unable to detach himself from his Kurdish identity. Each one has tended to adopt a divergent approach toward the realization of his identity, so as to elevate the pain of exile. The fact remains that both the writer and his protagonist long for a lost home and lost time. On the other hand, it can be understood

⁴⁷ *Shlomo...*, op. cit., p. 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁹ N. H a w k e r, op. cit., pp. 153–160.

⁵⁰ *Shlomo...*, p. 1.

as an attempt from the writer to take a broader view of human feelings toward war, home identity, assimilation, and the effects of emigration. Alburtis's humanity and the ways in which he lives his life with a rewarding sense of himself and his community are broken by his exile from his birthplace. The only power he possesses is his ability to shield himself with his past in the shape of his Kurdish identity against all the adversities of his exile and his capacity to remember his enemies who destroyed his "beloved Sāblāg", killed his wives and brought him to live as an outsider immigrant in Israel.