

FROM REBIRTH IN THE TIGRIS RIVER TO DOCUMENTATION OF THE IRAQI MARSHES:

Bodies of Water in the Prose Works of ‘Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubay‘i, Gha‘ib Tu‘ma Farman, and ‘Aliya Mamduh

[Received August 20th 2025; accepted November 10th 2025 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.279]

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ABSTRACT: The current article aims to shed light on the way three Iraqi authors - ‘Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubay‘i, Gha‘ib Tu‘ma Farman, and ‘Aliya Mamduh - refer in their works to two main bodies of water: the Tigris River and the marshes in Southern Iraq. It begins with a review of how the Tigris River has been depicted in Arabic poetry throughout the years and then explores the functionalities of the Tigris in prose works, both as a reflection of the characters’ inner world and as a means of social criticism. The final part of the article discusses life in the marshes through a short story written two decades prior to the drainage of the region imposed by Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the 1991 revolt and the Gulf War. Since the stories are rooted in the authors’ intimate knowledge of the region, they can be interpreted as having a historically informative function, adding the aspect of human emotional experience to what is usually examined through quantitative data alone.

KEYWORDS: Tigris River, marshes, Iraqi literature, ‘Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubay‘i, Gha‘ib Tu‘ma Farman, ‘Aliya Mamduh

Introduction: The Tigris River through History and in Arabic literature

Throughout the development of civilizations, the Tigris has been a prominent and significant landmark in the Fertile Crescent (Figure 1). From ancient societies up to the modern age, it has played crucial roles for the inhabitants around it: irrigation, drinking water, and industry (Husain, 2021, pp. 61–78). The river’s colours became symbols of the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in the 13th century, when, according to a myth, the Tigris was washed in red because of the spilled blood, and black due to the ink of the books the Mongols threw into it (Kadhim, 1999, p. 156). In the middle of the 16th century, Baghdad and Iraq of the time were conquered by the Ottomans, who recognised the value of the rivers and the swamps in Southern Iraq, as well as the economic benefits they offered, and regulated herding and crops in these marshes (in Arabic: al-ahwar) (Husain, 2021, p. 96). Later on, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Tigris River divided Baghdad into two main parts, al-Karkh and Rusafa (Walter, 2025, p. 24; al-Jamali, 2004, pp. 156 n., 42, 223). Floods occurred, and the size and width of the marshes shrank dramatically, when water was used as a weapon by Saddam Hussein, who drained the wetlands in southern Iraq and displaced Shiite Muslims considered a threat

to his regime (Açma, 2011, p. 106; Guarasci, 2017, p. 1; UN White Paper, 2011, p. 24; Aoki and Al-Lami, 2014, pp. 118-119; Chibani, 2023, p. 198-199; Dellapenna, 2007, pp. 401-409), as a consequence of the *intifadah* (uprising) of 1991,¹ as will be explained hereafter.



Figure 1 – Map of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the south-eastern marshes (based on Wikipedia source map with author’s alterations)

While the Tigris River was a silent witness to historic events in the area, in literature it has also been a symbol of the Iraqi people, who were subordinated to strict regimes (al-Jamali, p. 113). Depicted by poets as both dividing Baghdad’s neighbourhoods on the one hand, and linking them, on the other (Al-Attar, 2014, p. 127), the river has also been a means through which writers express their inner world and criticism. Baghdad “has an intimate relationship with the Tigris River, which provides beauty, fertility, and utility for the city” (Al-Attar, p. 44, 128–129), or as Pelle Valentin Olsen writes in his work on Baghdad in Hashemite Iraq:

The urban history of Baghdad has always been closely linked with the Tigris. The river was an important centre of commerce and transport, and for those who lived

¹ “The Intifadah began in the first days of March 1991 when Ba’ath soldiers who deserted the army retreated [from] Kuwait through southern Iraq, firing at Saddam’s murals as they went... Incited by the deserting soldiers and fueled by the promise of international support, the revolt immediately gained momentum as protesters in southern cities joined the rebellion” (Guarasci, 2011, p. 110).

and worked in the city, the banks of the Tigris and the river itself were important sites of normative leisure and play during the day. (Olsen, 2020, p.339)

The river has also played a significant role in various forms of Iraqi writing (Olsen, 2020, p. 339). Indeed, in Arabic literature, the Tigris has been a site to which various writers referred in their works; the city of Baghdad and 'her' river inspired poets' imagination (Al-Attar, 2014, p. 7).

After a short review of the artistic expressions of the Tigris in classical and modern Arabic poetry, a perusal of prose literary works by Iraqi novelists and short story writers will be presented through a partly ecocritical reading. In these works, we offer insight into what the Tigris River and the marshes mean for Iraqis and how they depict them in prose. This will enable us to better understand their inner world and their criticism of Iraqi society through the various functionalities of the river and the marshes.

I. A short review of the Tigris River in classical and modern Arabic poetry: A source of livelihood, beauty and floods

As it was a dominant component of everyday life throughout history, the Tigris River appeared regularly in poetry as a recurring theme (Cooperson, 1996), reflecting the human experience and its interaction with its surroundings and with other humans. We can trace these occurrences in Middle Eastern literature and even more so in Arabic literature. Arabic poetry, already in the Classical period,² depicted the Tigris River in detail, in a way that described the river as it was seen through the eyes of the poet, and less as a metaphor for the inner world of the poet, as would be the case later in modern Arabic poetry. When the Iraqi-born poet residing in Paris, 'Abd al-Qader al-Janabi (1944-), describes Baghdad, which was founded on the banks of the river in 762 by the caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, one of the first things he mentions is: "Tigris River with its moonlit banks" (Snir, 2013, p. 309). By saying this, he actually follows in the footsteps of the classical poet 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Tanukhi (892-953), who composed a poem denoting the relations between the Tigris River and the moon: "The Tigris on the moon, a blue carpet;/ the moon over the river, a golden veil" (p. 125). Hence, we see a common thread between poetry written in the 10th century and more modern views of the Tigris River.

Not only al-Tanukhi, but other poets as well referred to the Tigris River's beauty in their works and described the ships sailing on it. In the Abbasid era (750-1258), ships were mentioned as a means of transport as well as a scene of leisure and pleasure, or as vehicles enabling fishing and providing livelihood. Since most of the Abbasid caliphs ruled from Baghdad, their court poets frequently compared the ships on the Tigris River with the caliph, their patron. Poets and historians described festivals of ships and boats which took place on the river. Others compared the ships in the river, either the Tigris or the Euphrates, with a she-camel in the desert, as people ride both (Abu Zayd, 1993, pp. 17-19, 24, 146-147). Ships on the Tigris were compared by poets in later periods to racing horses (Al-Attar, 2014, p. 100). Since sacred places are located, among other places, along the Tigris River, special days are celebrated and commemorated there, for example, in the shrine of al-Khidr Elias (Jad, 2022, p. 102).

² i.e. the 7th to 19th centuries.

In modern Arabic poetry, approximately from the 19th century onwards, we find numerous depictions of the Tigris River. Ahmed Shawqi (1870–1932), ‘the prince of poets’ and the initiator of modern Egyptian poetry, for instance, appreciated the Tigris River and admired it no less than he did the Nile; he wrote about it as if the river was an outcome of a heavenly touch (Kozhabekova, p. 20).

The Lebanese American poet Amin Rihani (1876–1940) also visited Baghdad and wrote the following verses in 1922, attributing godly features to the Tigris River:

*I stand in front of him, and the mysteries of Time become clear.
I look at him, and through him the goddesses
Of provinces gaze at me*

The Tigris River is so godly that:

*Oak crowns his head;
Palm kneels at his feet.
For him, mountains erect temples;
And for his feet, plains spread wide.
Snow kisses his lips; the sand, his body.
His breath fuses with bays and oceans.*

According to Rihani, all of nature’s components bow down before the river, the immortal entity, “God of Iraq! Tigris!” (Rihani, 2002, pp. 63–66).

Since flooding was a regular occurrence (Susa, 1965), the catastrophes caused by the floods were also referred to by poets.³ Ma’ruf al-Rusafi (1875–1945) composed a poem on the disasters the rivers’ floods caused to Baghdad’s neighbourhoods in 1907:

*From Dayali, Euphrates, and Tigris,
troubles plague your people
Three rivers flowing with life,
yet the earth around you is barren...*

*Here is al-Rusafa encircled by water;
al-Karkh is ridden with calamities too ...*

*The Euphrates has united with the Tigris...
the houses spat out their residents...
Al-Karkh now becomes a scene of misery;
young men and women weep. (Snir, pp. 185–186).*

After a flood in 1954, Nazik al-Mala’ika (1923–2007) wrote a poem titled ‘The Passionate River.’ In this poem she uses semi-erotic terms for the river, and afterwards refers to it as a god, quite similarly to Rihani’s verses mentioned above:

³ In the work of Iman Al-Attar on Baghdad in the 18th and 19th centuries, it appears that historiographical sources referred mostly to the calamities caused by the river’s floods, while prose and poetry depicted the river’s beauty above all (Al-Attar, 2014, p. 66). We see here that in the 20th century, this changed, and poets began to depict the floods and catastrophes in blunt terms.

*The river still pursues us, smiling lovingly,...
Where can we escape after the river
envelops the city's shoulders?*

*It pours forth from its lips
Muddy kisses that immerse our sad farmland.
That lover, we knew it before...
Now the river has become a god.”(pp. 201–202).*

Thus, the river is referred to both in positive and negative contexts, occupying poets' imagination not only by its mere existence but also by its influence on the environment and man - “the river may also be at one and the same time a symbol of living and a symbol for the taking of life” (Bellem, 1997, p. 114).

Some of the above-mentioned images of the Tigris River in poetry, especially those depicting its beauty and ships, were later altered in prose works to more forlorn ones, as will be described below. As in poetry, prose has its fair share of discussing the image of the Tigris River. We will hereafter demonstrate, through a few case studies, the artistic ways in which three Iraqi writers relate to Iraq's main bodies of water: the first two, Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman and 'Aliya Mamduh, will be discussed in relation to the Tigris River, and the third, 'Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubay'i, in relation to the marshes in Southern Iraq. Farman and Mamduh have been chosen as case studies not because they are the only writers who depicted the Tigris River, but because of their specific works that will be discussed here, which have not yet been sufficiently studied academically. Not much research has been done on Farman's last novel, which we discuss in this piece, despite his pioneering role in modern Iraqi literature. Likewise, Mamduh's short stories have hardly gained any academic notice in comparison with her novels, which were extensively studied. Al-Rubay'i was chosen as a case study since his story is rare in Arabic literature in terms of depicting everyday life in the marshes, as well as because of the very few mentions, if any, that this story has received in academic research. Thus, exploring these three writers may enrich us not only regarding the ways the Tigris River and the marshes are perceived by Iraqis, but also shed light on these writers' techniques and artistic style.

II. The Tigris River in Modern Arabic Prose Fiction: Social Criticism and Rebirth

The novelist and short story writer Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman (1927–1990) was born into a poor family in Baghdad, and despite the low starting point from which he began his life and career, he became the first in Iraq to succeed in writing a modern novel when his *al-Nakhla wa-l-jiran* (*The Palm Tree and the Neighbours*) was published in 1965. Farman wandered between Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, and eventually settled in Moscow. In fact, he lived in exile for most of his adult life, partly due to his Leftist leanings which caused hostility from the Iraqi regime (Peled-Shapira, 2018).

In his writings, Farman gives room to the Tigris as part of the setting, serving as an ornament or location for the plot. In his novel *Alam al-sayyid Ma'ruf* (*The Pains of Mr. Ma'ruf*), which depicts the life of Ma'ruf who represents the Iraqi intelligentsia, the protagonist lives a relatively modest lifestyle and often clashes with his superiors at the office, representing intellectuals who suffer under the heavy hand of the Iraqi regime. Already in the first few lines of the novel, the river is mentioned three times: “Whenever he welcomed [the sunset]

from his corner in the coffee shop with the view of the river ... the birds which were fluttering above him while swooping on the river's surface... the line of palm trees on the other bank of the river" (Farman, 1982, p. 7). The Tigris River thus gives the frame of reference to the events in terms of location and space.

In his other novels as well, the Tigris has its place. In *Zilal 'ala al-nafidha* (*Shadows on the Window*), Farman tells the story of a family whose daughter-in-law, the wife of their middle son, runs away due to the suffering she has undergone in her husband's family home. The novel begins with the father, 'Abd al-Wahid al-Hajj Hussain, lost in thought and trying to avoid the passersby, since he is too ashamed to admit that his son's wife has run away. While trying to figure out where she might be, he fears for the family's reputation so much that he wishes she would be run over by a car or drown in the river (Farman, 1979, p. 10). The river in this novel is also connected to the idea of suicide: "In that moment the river seemed very close. It is only [one] more jump, and he will be in the arms of the river" (pp. 118–119). As seen in the aforementioned examples, Farman uses the Tigris to project either tranquillity or fear, in accordance with the plot's events.

Nevertheless, the most unique use of the Tigris River in Farman's prose works is found in his last novel, which was published in 1989, a year before his death. In this novel, *al-Markab* (*The Ship*), the Tigris is no longer a set on which events take place, but a space of essential importance for the dramatic events, and even a condition for their occurrence. The frame story is, supposedly, a simple one: co-workers from Baghdad ride a ship on a one-day journey to Jazirat Umm al-Khanazir, an island in the middle of the Tigris. Among the various events connected with this journey, both on the ship and on the island, including a group of workers who missed the ship and remained on the bank, and many discussions between the colleagues before and after the journey, a rumour about a severe rape circulates, although no such act actually occurred. The Tigris is not just there in the background but is the main arena; the ship and the island within it enable the rumours to spread. Siham travels with her co-workers to the well-known Jazirat Umm al-Khanazir island, a very common journey in Baghdad (Habba, 2011; Nazmi, 2019). Throughout the journey, she is subject to surveillance by Jaber, an unreliable drunk who works for the same company. Siham feels that she is being followed by him but has no idea why, or who sent him. She sees him as an informer and a spy.

The ship constitutes a heterotopic space in that it has "a system of opening and closure which isolates them in relation to the surrounding space... The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*" (Foucault, 2014, pp. 21–22). On the ship, Siham is isolated from all those who remain on the bank, as well as from the water in which the ship sails, and until the ship arrives at the island, she cannot get out. The island, like the ship, is a kind of heterotopia as well, for it is separated from the events on the banks, while at the same time it affects them. Therefore, Siham is a 'prisoner' from the moment she goes on that trip, through the time she spends on the island, and long after she returns home. On the ship, she is in the river but does not touch its waters, and while on the island, she is unable to escape Jaber, who frightens her, because the island is surrounded by water. These heterotopias on the Tigris enable Siham's tragedy to unfold. Jaber spreads a rumour that he raped Siham on the island and 'stained her honour,' and she becomes the talk of the town. The tragedy is compounded, since even Siham's family believes the rumour rather than her own account, and they wish to marry her off quickly to protect the family's reputation. When Siham refuses, her brother says, "No. We will marry you off" (Farman, 1989, p. 199).

Through the Tigris and the heterotopias within it, namely the ship and the island, Farman conveys criticism of society. Even the people closest to Siham — her mother, uncle, and two brothers — strive to protect their and her 'honour' by refusing to believe her. This criticism is intensified by the fact that Siham's brothers are educated men, an engineer and a lawyer, from whom one might expect greater tolerance and open-mindedness. Unfortunately, since they do not believe her, their education proves meaningless as far as she is concerned. In order to prove her claim, they ask her to confront the alleged rapist, which she refuses to do (pp. 112–115, 195–201).

Thus, Iraqi prose literature makes it possible to expose, through bodies of water, the faults of society — even in intimate matters, or perhaps especially in these matters. The Tigris River and the ships, which were once depicted in poetry as symbols of glory, as explained above, are transformed in these prose works into a means through which criticism can be expressed, particularly regarding the social norms of a patriarchal order that override personal well-being.

Another writer from Iraq who uses the Tigris River to reflect the inner world of her characters and their mental state is 'Aliya Mamduh (1944–). She was born in Baghdad, studied psychology, and worked as a journalist and editor of literary journals. She left Baghdad in 1982 and currently resides in Paris (Malky, 2005). In two of Mamduh's stories, the Tigris plays a dominant role in the protagonists' metamorphosis or reflects the parallelism between the outer world and the inner world of the characters.

The first story by Mamduh is 'Mubidāt li-l-ḥubb wa-l-thawra' ('Pesticides of love and revolution'), whose title already hints at the brutal eradication of two life-changing elements: love and revolution. This very short story, only a page and a half long, is a dialogue between a man and a woman, who are partly fighting and partly making love. "The man wants a bit of a cease-fire, and the woman was without a certain weapon" (Mamduh, 1973, p. 76) They are both sad, and old age threatens to infiltrate their room if they stop making love even for a short while. Echoes of aircraft and bombing surround them, and the death toll continues to rise. Eventually, the woman gets out of bed and suggests that they go bathe in the river. When they finally arrive, the river has changed its course, and the couple must bathe in their own tears (pp. 76–77).

The story shows how war outside the home affects its inhabitants immensely, and vice versa. Even when the Tigris River seems to be their only hope for tranquillity, it is but an illusion; it changes its route the minute the couple arrives. Thus, the river bears a promise of compassion and consolation, but these two do not materialise. The river's absence when it is most needed sentences the love between the man and the woman, most likely, to failure. From the sentence "the rate of suicide among the commanders was zero," (p.77) the reader understands that the revolution taking place outside with aeroplanes and bombs will fail too, as the number of the dead rises while the commanders do not take responsibility for the casualties.

Another story by 'Aliya Mamduh engaging with the Tigris River is 'Aden al-Jahim' ('Hell's Paradise'), which tells the story of Radiyya, a prostitute who lives in Baghdad in a cracked hut on the verge of collapse. The hut is so old that the winds seep through the cracks, and Radiyya is not protected even inside her hut, where she meets her clients. Like in Farman's story, Mamduh also describes social hypocrisy; mothers of grooms-to-be send their sons to Radiyya for their first sexual experience, but at the same time they ridicule and despise her, with such deep abhorrence that it ends in a lynching attempt (Mamduh, 1977, pp. 17–35).

Every day, in an almost ritual act, Radiyya walks to the riverbank, stepping barefoot on the moist soil and the protruding thorns. “The river was [like] another room for her, [it] always seemed like a bed for sleeping” (p.24) Nevertheless, the river has a twofold connotation; along with the comfort and convenience it offers, it is also connected with death: “She is looking at its colour from afar, is this river eligible for burying the dead, or for burying the living?” (p. 24) In her eyes, the water seems like towering men with hellish eyes, their flesh blending with flies and abscesses. While not missing a day in this ritual, she imagines seeing skulls waving to her to save them, and skeletons of frogs. All these visions grow bigger, covering the water’s surface. In this powerful scene, Radiyya is filled with worries, anger, and fear at the same time, a woman “whose eyes and body became full of love” (p. 24). These contradicting feelings indicate that the river for her is both a source of death and resurrection.⁴ In it, she is being born anew.

The terms used in this scene are deeply related to water: “the water which surrendered to her,” the banks, the moist soil, a wave that washes away her humiliation, blood, and dirt (p. 25). These terms, together with being barefoot and feeling the soil under her feet, hint that Radiyya is merging with nature. When she enters the water, her body seems soft, and she dances, cries, laughs, and shouts. Her body turns into a cover of the river, and the river becomes as clear as her eyes. Here, we see an explicit parallel between Radiyya and the river; they both become part of one another. As before, she looks at the dress she took off as if it were a drowning child being looked at. Thus, even when she enjoys the river’s water and feels free, a negative simile denoting death is used.

When Radiyya opens her eyes again, she is surrounded by smiling people who think she has gone mad, and the scene of the cruel lynching attempt begins (pp. 25–26). The Tigris River is part of the attempt but also the place where, at the end of the story, Radiyya bathes with Khaz’al, the only character who helps her. There, when the river’s water is calm, they do exactly what she did before while alone by stepping on thorns, shouting, and laughing but now finally both feel secure (p. 35).

Like in Farman’s *The Ship*, the river in Mamduh’s ‘Hell’s Paradise’ has heterotopic features, as it is both safe and frightening at the same time; a venue of rebirth and feeling alive on one hand, and a place of murder attempts and fear of death on the other. The Tigris, once the most beautiful treasure of Baghdad in earlier poetry, becomes dangerous in modern prose literature.

III. *Al-Ahwar*, the marshes of Southern Iraq in modern Iraqi prose: Documenting a region destined to disappear

Faisal Husain explains that until the late 20th century, the Iraqi marshes were among the largest in the world, forming a vast aquatic complex (Husain, pp. 95-107, especially p. 97).

⁴ Another scene of drowning in the Tigris as a metaphor for the end of the Jewish community in Iraq can be found in the works of Samir Naqqash (1938-2004) (Caiani, 2024, p. 78); For a heart-breaking artistic depiction of the hundreds of men caught by the security forces, tied, and thrown into the river, see Bellem (1997, pp. 118-120). In the American novel by Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (2012), the Tigris River also serves as a purifying element of a dead body, in the eyes of the deceased’s friend, a veteran of the Iraq war (Schliephake, 2016, p. 587).

Yet, the question remains: how did the residents perceive their home? How did Iraqis from other regions view the marshes when visiting? It seems that prose fiction is no less important than historical documents in filling this gap, offering valuable perspectives that have been largely neglected until now and putting Arab ecocriticism at the forefront.⁵

The novelist and short story writer ‘Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubay’i (1939–2023) was born in the Iraqi city of Nasiriyya, situated on the banks of the Euphrates River. He studied and taught arts and worked as a literary journalist and editor of the literary journal *al-Aqlam* (‘The Pens’). Al-Rubay’i also spent time in Cairo, Beirut, and Tunisia before returning to Baghdad (Campbell, 1996, pp. 635-637; Alsharqiya, 2023). Among various topics, he wrote about the Euphrates River. His short story ‘al-Sayf wa-l-safina’ (‘The Sword and the City’) (al-Rubay’i, 2002 [1966]), for example, explores a man’s longing for his beloved, a woman who may be unfaithful or lost to death, expressed through metaphors drawn from the water world: the Euphrates River, a port, a hungry whale, pools of water, and the croaking of frogs. However, the focus here is different: we aim to examine al-Rubay’i’s relationship to the Southern Iraqi marshes, which suffered severe hydrological damage under the regime of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. A close reading of al-Rubay’i’s short story ‘Sirr al-ma’ (‘The Secret of Water,’ 2002 [1975]) reveals a vivid portrayal of the marshland environment, drawn directly from the Iraqi swamps. The story describes fish and fishing at night, small boats unique to the region that serve as the primary means of transport in Southern Iraq, trade between the marsh dwellers and other Iraqi cities, the distinctive reed settlements on islets, the community’s hospitality towards guests, their level of literacy, religious sect, and their deep sense of belonging and contentment living in the marshes without the desire to visit other places: “I cannot imagine that there is life beyond the marsh” (p. 331).

The title of the story, directly connects with Husain’s description of the marshes as “secretive” and an “enigma” (Husain, 2021, p. 95). Indeed, the story reveals the marsh paths known only instinctively to its inhabitants, as if this knowledge were innate and mysterious. The plot centres on a sociologist traveling to the marshes to study and write a report about their residents.⁶ Before his arrival, his understanding of life in the marshes is very limited, but upon arriving, a new world unfolds before him thanks to his exceptionally generous host, Hatim.⁷ The sociologist accompanies the inhabitants on their nighttime fishing trips, joins them in selling fish to boats traveling to Iraqi cities, and most importantly, learns about marsh life through conversations with Hatim. What initially seemed to the sociologist as a “distant aquatic exile,” accompanied by loud bird and frog calls that prevent sleep and fear of poisonous snakes (pp. 327-328, 333), gradually transforms into a warm and welcoming place despite the howling wind outside the reed huts. By the story’s end, the sociologist “reveals” the secret hidden within the swamp. The narrative enriches readers with abundant details from the marshes, including precise names of places both within and outside the marshes, such as Basra, the small islet al-Kubeiba, the shrine of Hussain, the cities of Najaf and Karbalaa, and the Hammar Marshes.

⁵ In his article on Arab-Anglophone literature, Alaa Alghamdi claims that literature can represent power struggles through descriptions of the environment, since in the works he explored, “The environment is not merely a set, but an actor in human struggle and existence” (Alghamdi, 2025, p. 3). In the same manner, we can relate to the environment in the works discussed here as reflecting the atmosphere and reality prior to Saddam’s drainage of the marshes, and as contrasted with the situation following it.

⁶ On the connection between this story and *Rihla* (travel) literature, a well-known genre in Arabic literature, see Muhiddinova (2020, p. 44).

⁷ This name is not accidental. In Arab tradition, Hatim al-Ta’i, a poet from the 6th century, remains a model of exceptional generosity to this day.

Through the story, we learn about the everyday lives of the dwellers, the absence of thieves in the marshes, and their beliefs in mystical powers. They are observant Shiites, as Hatim tells the visiting sociologist how the marsh men were once absent because they were visiting Imam Hussain's shrine.⁸ We learn how they heat their huts with cattle dung, and how the lights of the small fishing boats are compared to those of cars. The waterways are known only to lovers who meet there and to the dwellers, who navigate the paths by the sun, stars, waves, and fish. The dwellers are depicted as united with the marsh; they feel the marsh and find their way through it by heart (pp. 328-329). Hatim feels that the marsh is a part of him, comparing himself to a fish; if he ever steps beyond the marsh, he believes he will die, just as a fish dies when it comes out of water (p. 331). Not only does the water supply the dwellers with food, but it also saves some of their lives during a fire that destroyed the huts (p. 332). Such a symbiotic and dependent relationship between humans and nature can be read through an ecocritical lens, since one of the basic assumptions of ecocriticism is the belief "that human culture is connected to the physical world; that is, humanity, the microcosm, directly affects and is affected by the physical world, the macrocosm" (Bressler, 2011, p. 235). Thus, in addition to documenting marsh life in detail, 'The Secret of Water' presents an attentive approach to nature and its interaction with humanity, showing much compassion and mindfulness towards the environment.

Jessica Barnes explains in her book on the Nile River and its waters how the Nile itself is being cultivated, no less than the land, by manipulating and diverting its water. By doing so, policymakers decide who will have access to this vital substance (Barnes, 2014). In Iraq, too, after the uprising in 1991 and the Gulf War, collective punishment was imposed by Saddam through the draining of the marshes, alongside mass killings and the forced resettlement of the marsh dwellers.⁹ From approximately 250,000 Marsh Arabs in 1991, fewer than 40,000 were believed to remain by 2003. The revolt was not the only cause; other motives included promoting modernisation in the area, but the revolt provided the final push for the drainage (Ahram, 2015, pp. 447-466; Human Rights Watch, 2003; United States Institute of Peace, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 7).

In considering the vast areas of marshes that were drained by order of Saddam, leaving only 3-6% of Iraq's marshes intact, the hundreds of thousands of dwellers who were forcibly relocated after losing their livelihoods (Guarasci, 2017, pp. 1-2), and the many animal species that could no longer survive due to the drainage, it is immensely important to gather details from various sources, including literary fiction. By providing the reader with so many fine details about this part of Iraq, 'The Secret of Water,' first published in 1975—two decades before Saddam drained the area—becomes a rare documentary work of an almost completely erased region, reviving an entire ecosystem just as effectively as statistical data.

Conclusion

A perusal of the works of al-Rubay'i, Farman, and Mamduh reveals several roles that the Tigris River and the marshes play. In Farman's works, the river is the stage where dramatic and life-changing events unfold. Siham's alleged rape and the rumours that turn her family against her become possible mainly because of her presence on a ship and an island in the

⁸ Hussain ibn 'Ali (d. 680), the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, died in the Battle of Karbala.

⁹ For an artistic depiction of the massacre, see: Bellem (1997, pp. 118-119).

Tigris River. The river thus enables the author to criticise family hypocrisy. In the conflict between personal well-being and societal norms, Siham is the one who loses. In Mamduh's works, we witness society's intolerance towards those living on its margins, a prostitute in this case, and how society exploits them while also seeking their destruction. The Tigris River not only reflects the protagonist's inner world but is also where she feels most alive and where the lynching attempt against her takes place. In al-Rubay'i's story, we find documentation of the Iraqi marshes before the large-scale drainage of the 1990s, a region that was almost completely erased by force. By depicting the environment and interpreting it through an ecocritical lens, while highlighting the interdependence of living and non-living elements, these writers add a crucial dimension to the chronicles of these Iraqi bodies of water. This suggests that the river and the marshes are not merely settings where events occur but may be seen as integral parts of human life events, and perhaps even as elements that enable those events.

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