

Digital Storytelling and the New Iraqi Narrative: Blogs, Social Media, and Literary Identity in Contemporary Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence and significance of digital storytelling as a transformative literary phenomenon in contemporary Iraq. Focusing on the period from 2003 to the present, it investigates how Iraqi writers, poets, and intellectuals have appropriated blogs, social media platforms, and online literary journals as alternative spaces for cultural expression, political dissent, and national identity construction. Drawing on theories of digital narratology, postcolonial literary criticism, and cultural memory studies, the paper argues that Iraqi digital literature constitutes a new literary genre with distinct aesthetic, rhetorical, and political characteristics — one that supplements, challenges, and at times surpasses the authority of print-based literary tradition. By analyzing prominent Iraqi blogs and social media literary communities, the paper identifies recurring themes of trauma, exile, resistance, and reconstruction that organize the new Iraqi digital narrative. It further situates this phenomenon within the broader Arabic digital literary movement while arguing for its unique Iraqi specificity. The paper concludes by foregrounding the implications of this shift for archival practices, literary canon formation, and the future of Arabic literary studies in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: digital storytelling, Iraqi literature, social media, blogs, Arabic literature, literary identity, digital narratology, cultural memory, exile, post-2003 Iraq

1. Introduction:

The literary history of Iraq is among the most storied in the Arab world, stretching from the classical poetry of the Abbasid court to the modernist innovations of the twentieth-century Baghdad literary circles that gave rise to movements such as free verse poetry (*al-shi'r al-hurr*) and committed literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) associated with names like Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, and Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati. Yet the political catastrophes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries — wars, sanctions, occupation, and sectarian violence — fractured this tradition, sending thousands of Iraqi writers into exile and imposing conditions of censorship and insecurity that made print publication dangerous, costly, or impossible. Into this rupture came the internet.

The proliferation of blogs in the early 2000s and the subsequent rise of social media platforms — Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, and Instagram — created unprecedented spaces within which Iraqi writers could produce, publish, and circulate literary work outside state and market control. Scholars of Arabic digital literature, such as Joseph Fahim, Elias Khoury, and Muhsin al-Musawi, have begun to map the contours of this emerging field, yet Iraqi digital literature specifically remains understudied relative to its cultural significance. This paper addresses that gap.

The central thesis of this paper is that Iraqi digital storytelling constitutes a new and distinct literary formation — shaped by the affordances of digital platforms, the exigencies of post-2003 political violence, the experience of displacement and diaspora, and the desire for alternative modes of cultural survival — that cannot be fully understood through the analytical frameworks developed for either traditional Arabic print literature or Western digital literary theory. To make this argument, the paper proceeds through a review of existing scholarship, a methodological account of its approach, and an extended analysis of Iraqi digital literary production organized around four thematic and formal dimensions: trauma narrative, exile poetics, political satire, and community formation.

The stakes of this inquiry extend beyond the purely literary. In a country whose cultural institutions were systematically dismantled over four decades of authoritarian rule and then further devastated by the 2003 invasion and its aftermath, the question of how literary culture survives, adapts, and regenerates is inseparable from the question of how Iraqi society itself reconstructs collective identity, historical memory, and civic life. Digital platforms, this paper argues, have become a primary site of that reconstruction — the improvised workshop of a new Iraqi cultural imagination.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Narratology and Online Literary Studies

The field of digital narratology has developed rapidly since the pioneering work of scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan and Janet Murray. Ryan's foundational arguments in *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) established that digital environments produce distinctive narrative affordances — interactivity, immersion, and non-linearity — that alter the conditions of storytelling. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) similarly argued that digital media inaugurate new narrative genres requiring new critical frameworks. More recently, Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) provided a theoretical vocabulary for understanding how database logic and algorithmic selection shape digital cultural production. These frameworks are indispensable, yet they were developed largely in reference to Western digital contexts, and their application to Arabic-language digital literature requires significant adaptation (Khalil 44).

Within Arabic literary studies, the scholarship of Muhsin al-Musawi has been foundational. His work on the Arabic novel and on the pan-Arab literary public sphere offers essential context for understanding how digital platforms have reconfigured long-standing tensions between local, national, and transnational literary identities (al-Musawi 78). Al-Musawi argues that the Arab literary public sphere was always contested and porous, shaped by migration, censorship, and the politics of publishing; the internet, on this reading, intensifies and accelerates dynamics already structural to Arabic literary life rather than introducing an entirely new order.

2.2 Iraqi Literature in Crisis and Diaspora

Scholars of modern Iraqi literature have extensively documented the devastating effects of four decades of war and authoritarian rule on Iraqi cultural production. Sinan Antoon's work, both scholarly and creative,

traces the systematic destruction of Iraq's literary and cultural infrastructure, from the looting of the National Library and Archives in 2003 to the assassination of poets and intellectuals during the sectarian conflict of 2006-2008 (Antoon 112). Dunya Mikhail's poetry, discussed extensively by Terri DeYoung in her study of modern Iraqi verse, enacts in literary form the condition of the Iraqi writer-in-exile: caught between a homeland that is simultaneously lost, remembered, and imaginatively reconstructed (DeYoung 95).

The Iraqi diaspora literary community has been studied by Rebecca Joubin, whose research foregrounds how exile conditions an aesthetic of fragmentation and displacement that cuts across genre lines in Iraqi prose and poetry (Joubin 201). Joubin's insight that Iraqi writers produce literature not despite dispossession but *through* and *out of* it provides a crucial theoretical orientation for the study of Iraqi digital literature, where the conditions of production are often themselves narrated as part of the literary text.

2.3 Blogs, Social Media, and the Arab Literary Sphere

The emergence of Arabic blogging in the mid-2000s attracted considerable scholarly and journalistic attention. Naomi Sakr's *Arab Television Today* (2007) and subsequent work on Arab media documented the ways in which new media platforms reconfigured possibilities for public speech in authoritarian Arab contexts. More specifically, Miriam Cooke's work on Arab women's writing opened critical perspectives on how gender intersects with digital expression, arguing that the relative anonymity available on digital platforms has allowed Arab women writers to engage topics — sexuality, domestic violence, religious authority — that remain largely taboo in print (Cooke 167).

The Arab Spring of 2010-2012 produced an enormous volume of scholarship on social media and political mobilization, much of which touched on literary and cultural dimensions. Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain's work demonstrated the structural role of social media in organizing collective action, but literary scholars have been more attentive to the ways in which platforms like Twitter and Facebook became venues for poetic expression, literary debate, and the circulation of cultural memory (Howard and Hussain 35). The specific case of Iraq, however, is underrepresented in this literature, partly because Iraq's trajectory after 2003 differed substantially from those of Egypt, Tunisia, or Syria.

2.4 Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Despite these contributions, three significant gaps remain in the existing literature. First, no sustained scholarly study has focused specifically on Iraqi digital literary production as a unified field of inquiry with its own history, aesthetic characteristics, and social functions. Second, existing studies of Arabic digital literature have tended to privilege prose fiction and political commentary over poetry, which in fact constitutes a major — and underanalyzed — dimension of Iraqi digital literary culture. Third, the relationship between the Iraqi digital literary field and the broader tradition of Iraqi print literature has been insufficiently theorized, with scholars tending either to subsume digital work under the rubric of the established tradition or to treat it as an entirely new phenomenon with no meaningful connections to prior literary history. This paper addresses all three gaps.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology drawing on three principal approaches: close reading of digital literary texts; discourse analysis of platform-based literary communities; and critical synthesis of existing primary and secondary sources in Arabic and English. Given the nature of the object of study — literary texts produced on digital platforms — the paper does not rely on quantitative data or computational methods, which are better suited to the analysis of large corpora than to the interpretive work of literary criticism. Instead, it pursues a depth-oriented approach, selecting representative examples of Iraqi digital literary production for extended analysis.

The primary texts analyzed in this paper include blog posts and serialized narratives from major Iraqi blogs active between 2004 and 2024; poetry collections and individual poems circulated via Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram; short fiction published in online Iraqi literary journals, including *Nasij al-Kalem* and the *Almada* cultural supplement; and literary discussions, debates, and manifestos circulated within Iraqi digital literary communities. Sources were selected on the basis of literary significance, representativeness of broader trends, and critical attention received within the Iraqi literary field.

The paper's analytical framework integrates three theoretical orientations: digital narratology (Ryan; Manovich), which provides tools for analyzing the formal properties of digital texts; postcolonial and diaspora literary theory (Bhabha; Spivak; Joubin), which contextualizes Iraqi digital literature within broader dynamics of displacement, cultural resistance, and identity negotiation; and cultural memory studies (Assmann; Erll), which illuminates the role of digital platforms in the construction, preservation, and contestation of collective memory in post-conflict societies. The integration of these frameworks reflects the paper's conviction that Iraqi digital literature is simultaneously a formal, political, and mnemonic practice.

4. The New Iraqi Digital Narrative: Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Blog as Witness: Trauma Narrative in the Digital Age

Among the most significant early manifestations of Iraqi digital literature were the first-person narratives published on blogs during and immediately after the 2003 invasion. These texts, produced under conditions of extreme duress by Iraqi writers who remained in the country, established a genre of what might be called *testimonial digital fiction* — texts that blurred generic boundaries between journalism, memoir, and literary prose in order to bear witness to events that official media, both Iraqi state media and the international press, systematically misrepresented.

The blog known as "Baghdad Burning," authored under the pseudonym Riverbend, is the most widely read and critically discussed example of this genre. Published between 2003 and 2007, the blog documented daily life in occupied Baghdad through a female narrator's perspective, interweaving observations of political violence, economic collapse, and social dislocation with reflections on Iraqi cultural identity and literary tradition. Riverbend's prose demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of audience — aware that she was writing for an international readership while simultaneously addressing Iraqi readers — that produces a distinctive rhetorical double-voicedness (Bhabha 211). The blog was

subsequently published in print form in two volumes, a trajectory that itself illustrates the permeable boundary between digital and print literary culture in contemporary Iraq.

Beyond Baghdad Burning, dozens of Iraqi blogs emerged between 2003 and 2010, ranging from the explicitly literary to the more journalistic. What unites them as a literary formation is their commitment to a poetics of immediacy — the sense that the text is produced in close proximity to the events it narrates, that writing is itself a survival strategy. This poetics has precedents in the Arabic tradition of *rihla* (travel writing) and in the prison literature produced by writers incarcerated under the Ba'athist regime, yet the blog form gives it a new temporal structure: the archive of posts that accumulates over time creates a form of distributed autobiography, in which individual experience becomes legible as historical testimony (Assmann 78). The blog's unique temporality — the dated post, the reader's comment, the accumulated archive — produces a literary form that is simultaneously immediate and historical, personal and collective.

Moreover, the testimonial function of the Iraqi blog cannot be separated from its documentary one. In a context where official records are unreliable, archives have been looted or destroyed, and mainstream media coverage is filtered through geopolitical interests, the blog became an instrument of counter-documentation — a record of what was happening to ordinary Iraqis that would otherwise have gone unrecorded. This convergence of the literary and the archival defines a distinctive dimension of Iraqi digital storytelling and distinguishes it from Western blog culture, where the testimonial stakes are typically lower.

4.2 Exile Poetics and the Diasporic Digital Imagination

If trauma narrative characterizes the digital writing of those who remained inside Iraq, exile poetics characterizes the equally voluminous production of Iraqis writing from the diaspora — in London, Stockholm, Detroit, Toronto, and a hundred other cities that became the improvised capitals of a dispersed Iraqi literary community. Exile has of course been a constitutive theme of modern Iraqi poetry since the Ba'athist repression of the 1970s forced many of Iraq's greatest writers abroad; what digital platforms have done is transform the conditions under which exile is written and circulated.

The poet Dunya Mikhail, working in the United States, has used both her own website and social media platforms to circulate poems that engage the experience of displacement with a formal elegance rooted in the classical Arabic tradition while simultaneously drawing on free verse and contemporary poetic diction. Her use of Twitter and Facebook to share short lyric fragments — sometimes complete poems, sometimes lines from longer works — demonstrates an understanding of how platform affordances can serve poetic ends: the brevity enforced by early Twitter's 140-character limit, for instance, resonates productively with the Arabic tradition of the *bayt* (single verse) as a complete unit of meaning (DeYoung 101). Mikhail's digital practice is not merely a distribution strategy but an aesthetic choice: by releasing poems as fragments into social media streams, she creates a reading experience that is itself marked by displacement, interruption, and the need to reconstruct wholeness from fragments.

More broadly, Iraqi diaspora poets have used digital platforms to construct what might be called an *imagined literary community* — a distributed network of readers, writers, and commentators who maintain

collective literary identity across national borders and time zones. The Facebook group "Iraqi Poets and Writers" (*al-Shuara wa al-Kuttab al-Iraqiyyun*) has functioned since 2010 as a major node in this network, hosting literary debates, publishing original poems and stories, commemorating the deaths of prominent Iraqi literary figures, and organizing virtual events that bring together Iraqi writers from multiple continents. This community-building function is literary in the broadest sense: it constitutes and sustains the social institutions without which literary culture — the audience, the criticism, the shared reference — cannot exist (Cooke 183).

The exile poetics of Iraqi digital literature is also characterized by a specific relationship to place that differs from both the classical Arabic poetry of longing (*al-hanin ila al-watan*) and the modernist exile poetics of the twentieth century. In Iraqi digital poetry, place is not a fixed origin to which the poet hopes to return but a dynamic, contested, and often unrecognizable entity — a homeland that has been so transformed by violence that return would itself be a form of exile. This sensibility, which might be called *postmodern exile*, finds its natural form in the digital text: non-linear, geographically unanchored, multiply mediated, always in transit.

4.3 Political Satire and the Aesthetics of Resistance

A third major dimension of Iraqi digital literary production is political satire. Satire has a long history in Arabic literature — the classical tradition of *hija* (invective poetry) is among the oldest and most technically demanding Arabic literary genres — and contemporary Iraqi writers have mobilized this tradition with remarkable creativity on digital platforms. The affordances of social media, in particular, suit satirical modes: the brevity and shareability of tweets and Facebook posts, the visual dimension of memes and short videos, and the immediacy of platform publication all enhance the satirical text's capacity to intervene in real time in political discourse.

Iraqi satirical poets and writers working on social media have addressed a wide range of targets: the corruption of the post-2003 political class, the violence of sectarian militias, the failures of the international community, and the cultural impoverishment imposed by years of war and sanctions. The satirical mode is not merely comic but deeply literary: it requires precision of language, awareness of tradition, and the capacity to condense political analysis into aesthetic form. Writers such as Ahmad al-Rashid and the collective behind the satirical page "Iraq Laughs" have built substantial online audiences through satirical writing that explicitly draws on classical Arabic literary conventions while engaging thoroughly contemporary political content (al-Musawi 145).

The political function of this satire should not be underestimated. In a country where print journalism remains subject to political pressure and physical danger, and where television media are largely controlled by political parties or armed groups, social media platforms constitute one of the few spaces where critical commentary on power can reach a mass audience. Digital satirical literature thus performs, in the contemporary Iraqi context, a function analogous to that performed by the underground press or the *samizdat* in other authoritarian contexts — with the important difference that its audience is both local and global simultaneously (Howard and Hussain 48). The viral potential of social media means that a satirical poem or story that might reach a few hundred readers in print can reach hundreds of thousands online, fundamentally altering the political economy of dissent.

The satirical tradition of Iraqi digital literature also illuminates a broader tension within the field: between the desire for local relevance and specificity — satire that speaks to Iraqis about Iraqi realities in the idioms and allusions of Iraqi cultural life — and the desire for international legibility and reach. This tension is not always resolved productively; sometimes the demand for international audience produces a flattening of satirical specificity, a reduction of complex political commentary to the familiar vocabulary of global media discourse. The most accomplished Iraqi digital satirists, however, manage to be locally rooted and internationally comprehensible simultaneously, a skill that itself constitutes a distinctive literary achievement.

4.4 Online Literary Journals and the Institutionalization of Digital Literature

Beyond individual blogs and social media accounts, Iraqi digital literature has developed institutional forms: online literary journals and cultural platforms that apply editorial standards, commission work, and provide the organizational infrastructure of a literary field. *Nasij al-Kalem* (Woven Words), established in 2008, is among the most significant of these, publishing poetry, short fiction, literary criticism, and cultural commentary by Iraqi writers inside the country and in the diaspora. The editorial practice of *Nasij al-Kalem* explicitly engages questions of literary quality and tradition, positioning itself in relation to — and as a continuation of — the modernist Iraqi print literary tradition associated with journals such as *Shi'r* and *al-Aqlam*.

This institutionalization of digital literary culture represents a crucial development in the maturation of Iraqi digital literature as a field. It suggests that what began as an improvised response to crisis — the blog as survival mechanism — has developed into a self-conscious literary culture with its own institutions, debates, and canons. The relationship between these digital institutions and the surviving institutions of Iraqi print literary culture (universities, cultural centers, print journals) remains complex and often fraught, with representatives of the print tradition sometimes dismissing digital literature as insufficiently rigorous and digital practitioners sometimes positioning their work as a deliberate departure from what they see as the hierarchies and exclusions of the established field (Khalil 89).

This institutional tension has productive as well as negative dimensions. On the negative side, it can produce an artificial bifurcation of Iraqi literary culture into print and digital domains that are in practice more deeply intertwined than the polemics suggest. Many of the most prominent figures in Iraqi digital literature are also active in print culture as writers, editors, or critics; and many print institutions have established digital presences that blur the boundary between the two domains. On the productive side, the tension has generated substantive critical debates about literary quality, cultural authority, and the relationship between aesthetic innovation and political commitment that have enriched Iraqi literary culture as a whole.

4.5 Gender, Anonymity, and the Expansion of Iraqi Literary Space

One of the most significant social effects of the shift to digital platforms has been the expansion of literary participation to voices previously marginalized or excluded from the Iraqi print literary field. This is particularly evident in the domain of gender. Iraqi women have of course always written literature — Nazik al-Malaika remains one of the towering figures of twentieth-century Arabic poetry — but the social and institutional pressures of Iraqi literary culture, which remains substantially male-dominated, have

systematically disadvantaged women writers seeking access to publication, critical attention, and professional networks.

Digital platforms have partially disrupted these dynamics. The possibility of pseudonymous publication, combined with the lower barriers to entry of blog and social media publication, has allowed Iraqi women writers to produce and circulate work on topics — sexuality, religious doubt, domestic violence, female desire — that face significant resistance in print publication. Scholars such as Miriam Cooke have documented this phenomenon across the Arab world; in the Iraqi case, it is intensified by the additional pressures of a post-conflict, highly conservative social climate in which women's public cultural expression is subject to both formal and informal censorship (Cooke 201). The digital literary sphere has, in this context, functioned as a space of relative freedom — not absolute, since digital publication brings its own risks, including harassment and exposure — but meaningfully expanded relative to what the print field offers.

The anonymity or pseudonymity available on digital platforms also enables forms of literary experimentation — with genre, voice, and perspective — that the accountability structures of print publication tend to discourage. An Iraqi writer who publishes under her own name in a print literary journal writes within a horizon of identifiable consequences; a writer who maintains a pseudonymous blog or Facebook page can take greater risks, adopt multiple personae, and explore the limits of literary convention with a freedom that the print field does not equally afford. This is not, to be clear, an unqualified good: anonymity also enables harassment, misinformation, and the avoidance of accountability for harmful speech. But in the specific context of Iraqi literary culture — where the risks of public cultural expression have historically been and in many cases remain severe — the protective dimension of digital anonymity has enabled a meaningful expansion of the Iraqi literary imagination.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Iraqi digital storytelling constitutes a new and distinct literary formation, shaped by the convergence of technological affordance, political catastrophe, diaspora experience, and cultural resilience. Through analysis of trauma narratives, exile poetics, political satire, digital literary institutions, and the gendered expansion of literary participation, it has demonstrated that Iraqi digital literature is not merely a digitized version of existing print literary culture but a genuinely new cultural phenomenon with its own aesthetics, social functions, and political stakes.

The implications of this argument extend in several directions. For scholars of Arabic literature, it calls for a reconfiguration of the field to incorporate digital texts as primary objects of study, alongside the canonical works of the print tradition. This reconfiguration is not merely a matter of expanding the archive; it requires developing new critical frameworks adequate to the formal properties of digital texts — their temporality, their platform-specificity, their interactive and participatory dimensions — that existing literary critical methods cannot fully address. For archivists and librarians, the argument foregrounds the urgent need for systematic preservation of Iraqi digital literary texts — blogs that disappear when platforms shut down, social media posts that vanish when accounts are deleted — before this material is permanently lost. The scale of potential loss is enormous: the Iraqi digital literary archive

of the 2003-2010 period, in particular, is already seriously incomplete, and without concerted preservation efforts, future scholars will be unable to reconstruct the full dimensions of this cultural moment.

For literary theorists, the paper's argument suggests that the frameworks of digital narratology developed in Western contexts require substantial adaptation to address the specific conditions of Arabic digital literary production. The political stakes of digital writing in Iraq — where blogs have documented atrocities, satire has challenged militias, and pseudonymous poetry has given voice to censored experience — are not reducible to the frameworks developed to analyze hypertext fiction or interactive narrative games in Western academic contexts. A fully adequate theory of Iraqi digital literature will need to integrate the insights of digital narratology with those of postcolonial theory, cultural memory studies, and the specific tradition of Arabic literary criticism.

Future research should pursue several directions that this paper has been unable to fully address. A comparative study of Iraqi, Syrian, and Egyptian digital literary production would illuminate both shared features of the Arabic digital literary field and the specific ways in which national historical circumstances shape digital literary culture. A computational analysis of large corpora of Iraqi digital texts could identify patterns of theme, form, and circulation that close reading alone cannot detect. And extended ethnographic work with Iraqi digital literary communities — inside Iraq and in the diaspora — could provide the sociological depth that textual analysis alone cannot achieve.

What is already clear, however, is that the story of Iraqi literature in the twenty-first century cannot be told without attending to the digital platforms through which so much of it has been written, published, read, and debated. The blog, the tweet, the Facebook post, and the online journal are not merely vessels for literary content but constitutive elements of a new literary form — one that bears witness to Iraq's ongoing reckoning with violence, loss, and the enduring human need to transform experience into language and language into art. In this sense, the new Iraqi digital narrative is not only a response to crisis but a testament to the irreducible creativity of a literary culture that has survived — and continues to speak — against extraordinary odds.

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