

Secondary Publication



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Moosavi, Amir, *Dust That Never Settles: Literary Afterlives of the Iran-Iraq War*: Stanford, 2025

Date of secondary publication: 12.06.2026

Submitted Version (Preprint), Review

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-115540x

Primary publication

Werner, Christoph U. (2025): Moosavi, Amir, *Dust That Never Settles: Literary Afterlives of the Iran-Iraq War*: Stanford, 2025, in: *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, Berlin: De Gruyter, Vol. 120, No. 4–5, pp. 289–291, doi: 10.1515/olzg-2025-0163.

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REZENSION für OLZ (2026) Pre-Print

Moosavi, Amir: *Dust That Never Settles. Literary Afterlives of the Iran-Iraq War.* Stanford: Stanford University Press 2025 (= Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures). \$ 30.00. ISBN 978-1-5036-4295-9.

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Every war has at least two sides. However, it is rare to see both sides represented equally. This is particularly true when it comes to the depiction of war in art, film or literature. Amir Moosavi does exactly that. He discusses the literary treatment of one of the cruellest and most senseless wars of the 20th century—the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq War—in both Arabic and Persian literatures. This is a significant contribution to war literature and an important step towards a comparative understanding and analysis of contemporary Middle Eastern literary cultures.

At the outset, Moosavi sketches his three primary aims. First, he intends to introduce English-speaking readers (i.e. those who do not necessarily read Arabic or Persian) to the central role of the Iran–Iraq War in Arabic and Persian literature. Second, he aims to explore how this fiction has contributed to social and political debates about the recent past in both countries. Third, he proposes this literary theme and genre as an ‘entryway’ to the study of modern and contemporary Arabic and Persian literatures. The timeframe extends beyond the war years themselves, with contemporary literature included up to publications from 2018. The focus of this book is limited to prose fiction, although poets and works of poetry are mentioned throughout. In the introduction, Moosavi also sets out two major themes: the Karbala paradigm for Iran and the motif of the Battle of Qadisiyya for Iraq, both of which are anchored in early Islamic history. These are mirrored by two ideological strands: Islamisation in Iran and Baathification in Iraq. These strands directly influence the war literature under discussion and partly replace the previous tenets of committed literature linked to socialist or communist ideas in both countries. This parallelism is fascinating to discover.

During the war, literary production was characterised first and foremost by the need to create immediate propaganda, recruit and train new writers, and establish themes, motifs and topics. In Iran, this occurred amid an ongoing revolutionary struggle, with many established authors moving into exile. Meanwhile, in Iraq, established writers had to be co-opted and new writers introduced to the literary scene. Amir Moosavi clearly struggles to strike a balance between rejecting these texts outright as ‘bad literature’ and appreciating the effort that went into producing them.

Only a few books from this period continue to be read and appreciated, including Ahmad Mahmud’s *Zamin-e sukhteh*, the only text discussed in detail in this chapter. More important than the literary output was the creation of structures and institutions to foster literary production. In Iran this is represented by the journal *Sureh* published by the Center for Islamic Art and Thought (*Howzeh*). The link to the publishing house *Sureh-ye Mehr*, founded in 1998, deserves to be mentioned, as early institutional networks not only survived the war, but expanded in the 1990s. The massive output on the Iraqi side is not matched on the Iranian side, immediately visible as Moosavi introduces the multi-volume *Qadisiyyat Saddam* anthologies with an impressive number of volumes. However, comparable is the quality that renders most of these productions indigestible. Both sides employed the trope of martyrdom, more national on the Iraqi side, more religious on the Iranian front. Absent in Moosavi’s discussion are the memoirs and diaries, often from Basiji war volunteers that were published as authentic accounts rather than works of fiction. Nevertheless, the boundaries between ‘literature’ and ‘memoirs’ are not always clear. Eric Butel’s 2001 thesis, *Le martyre dans les mémoires de guerre iraniens: Guerre Iran/Irak (1980–1988)*, could have been useful here.

The post-war literary scene sees new developments on both sides. What Moosavi calls poetic elements that are new to this period, can also be described as formal elements, among them fragmentation and impressionism. The pairing of authors is highly ingenious: Muhammad Khudayyir with Shahriar Mandanipour and Lu'ay Hamza Abbas with Amir Hasan Chehelatan. Close readings of four short stories, or in Khudayyir's case, short vignettes or sketches, reveal the depth and significance achieved by the authors, who surpass the official discourse by shifting attention to bereaved relatives, friends and parents, as well as to the deceased, who appear in various forms. The focus of the literature moves from the mechanisms of the fighting itself to the suffering after the war. Striking parallels can be seen in the way animals and human-animal interaction are integrated into the narratives, functioning as allegories and reminders of the cruelty that is unique to humans.

The following chapter again pairs two Iraqi and two Iranian authors, focusing on literature that is more mature and clearly subversive. This literature questions not only the dominant position of the martyr, but even state authorities and official ideology. The Iranian fiction takes up more space in this chapter, with detailed discussions of the works of Ahmad Dehqan and Hoseyn Mortezaian Abkenar, including his novel *Scorpion* (also available in a 2013 German translation). While the translation of Dehqan's novel by Paul Sprachman is mentioned, it is not noted that this was an official translation commissioned by the Iranian cultural authorities and published simultaneously in Iran and the US. Not only are the Iranian novels given more space, they also appear technically stronger and play on a different literary level: they have won literary prizes, have been at least partly supported by the establishment, and are more original in their literary composition. The Iraqi novels discussed, written by Janan Jasim Hillawi and Muhsin al-Ramli, offer a critique not only of the war, but also of Baathist ideology and Saddam Hussein. Both were written in exile, offering an outsider's perspective from Sweden and Spain. In the conclusion of this chapter, Moosavi highlights what has already become apparent in the discussion of these novels. Exilic writers have a different relevance, even if their work is published in Beirut or Cairo. They write from a post-war and post-Saddam position, whereas the Iranian literature, despite its oppositional defiance, remains part of the Islamic Republic's literary landscape and the project of 'Holy Defense'. Although this literature is subversive, questioning the nobility and purity of the martyr concept and depicting in shocking details the absurdity and cruelty of this war's death and dying, it is not necessarily anti-war literature. Comparing Ahmad Dehqan with Dehnamaki's hugely popular film *Ekhrājīha* shows that subversive criticism can strengthen official positions, forming part of internal political debates. An interesting perspective is the postmodernist interpretation of these texts as presenting 'apocryphal history' (following Brian McHale).

The subtitle of Moosavi's book, the "literary afterlives", is once again at the heart of the final chapter "Ghosts of a Violent Past". Indeed, ghosts, spectres and the undead haunt the protagonists of Iraqi and Iranian literature, written by a new generation long after the war, who barely remember it through childhood memories. In the case of Iraq, the Iran- Iraq War only marks the beginning of a cycle of recurring violence, and authors allude to this initial war even when writing about more recent periods. The first text discussed is Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which sets the tone. Hassan Blasim transports us back to the era of Saddam's Qadisiyya literature in an eerie dialogue between an unearthed dead writer and his contemporary counterpart. Dīaa Jubaili is introduced through his poignant "flash fiction". The Iranian perspective is represented through a detailed discussion of the novel *Pruning (Haras)* by Nasim Marashi, which interweaves post-war mourning processes with environmental and ecological disasters in a setting that is partly magical and surreal. In all these texts the war is remembered as distant; civilians and survivors are at the forefront, and battlefields, front lines and weaponry no longer play a crucial role. Both sides have become much closer in their memories and their haunted existence, especially in the destroyed and polluted landscapes they share, exemplified by the beheaded date trees in both literatures.

The conclusion provides a fascinating overview of the various and evolving modes and conditions of literary production for Iraqi and Iranian authors. Present-day Iraqi authors can more easily find alternative publishing options; censorship no longer plays the crippling role that it did under Saddam, and the borders between authors inside and outside Iraq are more permeable. In contrast, strict censorship and state-sponsored writing on the war continues in Iran. Persian authors in the diaspora struggle to find a readership (or even publishing options beyond print-on-demand or the internet) and often have to resort to translations in other languages. The war is evident in other cultural productions, such as film, visual art and music, and remains a prevalent topic in Iran. In Iraq, however, cultural production and memory have moved on.

Finally, Moosavi pleads the scope of further research to be widened to investigate a body of post-1979 literature from additional countries such as Lebanon, Algeria, and Afghanistan, as well as to consider languages other than Arabic and Persian. This could be a step towards gaining a more realistic view of Middle Eastern literature as a whole.

This book is an invitation. For this reviewer it was an opportunity to explore Iraqi authors, books and stories about the war and to catch up on what I had missed so far in the field of Arabic war literature. Moreover, I was inspired to revisit some modernist Persian literary classics, such as the works by Bahram Sadeqi, and to take a closer look at some authors' early stories, such as those by Shahriar Mandanipur. Hopefully, this invitation will extend to Iraqis and Iranians on both sides of the conflict who might not be familiar with each other's literature. This book is a third space: a neutral zone for both languages and literatures that is not linked to the militant nationalisms of either side. It makes for compact and engaging reading, and stands out for the right combination of theoretical reflections, insightful analysis and lively discussions of contents and storylines. It is a valuable contribution to the redefinition and expansion of our understanding of Middle Eastern literatures.