



Straight from the Battlefield: A Study of Blog Diaries from Iraq War

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Abstract

This article undertakes to explore blogging as a privileged form of self-expression in war-torn Iraq. It proposes to analyze two blog diaries, one by Salam Pax and the other by Riverbend (both pseudonyms) in the backdrop of the US attack on Iraq and its subsequent occupation in 2003. They are significant as their coverage of the war is three-pronged. These war narratives record the battles of ordinary men and women who negotiate violence, fear and strife on daily basis in Iraq. The bloggers undertake political analysis and continuous appraisal of the situation throughout the conflict. As they do so, they offer a discourse different from that of the cheerleaders of war and liberation and also provide deep insight into the motives of local leaders and US representatives in Iraq. The blogs compare life in Iraq before and after the “occupation” and lament the institution of political Islam and the proposed division of Iraq on ethnic lines. Lastly, they serve to bridge the people on both sides of the border despite their cultural differences. The blog named *Where is Raed?* at dear_raed.blogspot.com maintained by Salam Pax and riverbendblog.blogspot.in by Riverbend were later published in the traditional format as books titled *The Baghdad Blog* and *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* respectively.

Keywords: Baghdad, Blog, Diary, Iraq, Riverbend, Salam Pax, War

Introduction

Of the many legacies of the US occupation of Iraq, blog diaries stand out as important documents covering the war in unprecedented ways. Blogs contributed to the production of knowledge on Iraq during years of war. With the advent of the blogosphere, communication from Iraq became people-centric in comparison to the state-sponsored literature produced earlier under Saddam Hussein. Many trauma narratives recounting the incarceration and torture of Iraqi

people in prisons came to light. Haifa Zangana's *Through the Vast Halls of Memory* (1991) is an account of the torture she went through in the Abu Gharib prison. Nuha-al-Radi wrote *Baghdad Diaries* (1999) which records the daily travails of Iraqi people during the Gulf War of 1991. However, most of the literature was published outside the country as the dissemination of any kind of writing has long been controlled by the Iraqi government. The overthrow of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime by the coalition forces in 2003 ended an extremely repressive rule but led to a leadership vacuum and chaos in Iraq. The US invasion of Iraq was glossed over by the rhetoric of liberation and war propaganda. The picture of Iraq presented by the Western media to the world was lop-sided and the coverage of the US attack on Iraq was inadequate. Blogs during the 2003 war, however, make a clear distinction between the liberation claims and the predicament of Iraq. The multidimensional coverage of war through blogs reveals the hegemonic stance of the US and its willfulness. While carrying out an incisive analysis of the politics of the "war on terror," the blogs enhance the readers' understanding of Iraq, its culture and its people and help in creating dialogue across cultures.

The Advent of the Internet

The groundbreaking discovery of the World Wide Web in 1994 changed everything. In 1997, American writer Jorn Barger coined the term "weblog," which was later shortened to "blog" and turned into a verb by Evan Williams, a co-founder of the Blogger and Twitter services. The Internet has democratized the process of writing to a great extent. There is a shift from the margins to the centre with ordinary people choosing to articulate their stories. Of course, the young and technologically oriented people with fairly good knowledge of English are the first to break their silence and share their narratives with the world. Anyone who has access to a computer can tell his or her story or the story of a community and nation to the whole world. Those living in the battle zones have benefitted a lot from the medium. The communication during insurgency being truncated, the blogs provide an unadulterated account of the happenings. The blogs also cut across borders to create spaces for dialogue. This fast interconnectivity has created new spaces for articulation. Noted journalist Julian York says the online diaries are

as old as the web itself whereas the blog came into existence by the turn of the century. In her study of the digital forums in the Arab world, she points to the increasing use of the blogosphere for political and social debate and activism. It is also to be noted that bloggers are increasingly communicating across borders and networks are being formed as a result of the shared cause of resistance to dictatorship and western hegemony. “This was made possible by a new genre of autobiography produced by changes in communication technology: the weblog or blog” (Whitlock 1). Eugenia Siapera in her article “Bridge Bloggers in the Middle East” studies the contribution of blogging in terms of redressing stereotypes and building bridges across diverse cultures and religions. She also argues that social media have created new opportunities for debate and criticism which entail political change. Jillian York, while expounding on the contribution of web forums, says,

Such forums became sources of unreported news, discussion, social commentary, and political debate, paving the way for the region’s future bloggers. In countries where political discussion was taboo and crossing red lines – such as discussion of the ruling family, or debates about Islam – resulted in persecution of journalists, web forums created new spaces outside of society, where political discussion was relatively safe. (York 33-34)

Where is Raed? and Riverbend blogs

Blog entries of two Iraqis, who stayed in Iraq throughout the war and the “de-Ba”athification” process, resonated with the western reader. Timed with the US “war on terror” following 9/11, the two blogs became popular. Their analyses yield a lot of information and reveal the complexity of the situation in Iraq. In September 2002, a new autobiographical subject named Salam Pax was born online. The twenty-nine-year-old architect started writing a blog under the sobriquet Salam Pax ostensibly addressing his Palestinian-Jordanian friend Raed, a palindrome of dear. Raed, Pax’s co-blogger, used to study architecture with Pax. Blogging on demand through unprecedented and intimate exchange between himself, Raed and his readers, he gradually grew in stature. Eventually, Salam Pax became

a cyber-celebrity. Rory McCarthy thinks his weblog “blossomed in confidence from idle chat to startling reportage that seems to have been driven by an underlying urge to resist the regime and to document its fall” (McCarthy 2003). Cooke observes that several Iraqi women chose to chronicle their lives reeling under the aftereffects of war and occupation. Some were engaged in group blogging and others were writing individual blogs under pseudonyms like HNK, Marshmallow 26 and Chikitata.

Whereas the earlier conflicts produced state-sponsored literature that was conventionally published and distributed, this latest stage has seen a transformation in the production of war stories. Young women and men have turned to the internet to publish their experiences. These bloggers are writing for a global audience so that they keep abreast of social and political developments in their occupied country. (Cooke 23)

Another blog that caught the attention of the world post-US occupation of Iraq was written under the pseudonym Riverbend. She began to post her blog in August 2003. Her blog moves over a variety of subjects that closely concern Iraqi people. Ahdaf Soueif in her foreword to the book (based on Riverbend blogs) rightly points out, “*Baghdad Burning* brings us as close to the war in Iraq as it’s possible to be. And close does not mean just knowing about electricity cuts and water shortages, about street battles and raids on homes; close means right inside the heart and mind of a young Baghdadi woman as she lives through the war” (Soueif VII). The stories of Iraqi people move beyond the personal to evoke universal reactions against warmongering and expose the US indifference to the Iraqi plight under military rule.

Citizen Journalism

Blogging proved to be extremely significant in the highly volatile and unstable Iraq of 2003 when there was a dearth of journalists reporting live from Iraq. “...The primary role of those new technologies has been to bypass professional news media organizations, and to undermine their role as gatekeepers,” says Glenn Harlan Reynolds

(59). She is of the view that the internet is serving the role of disintermediation. Internet bloggers are cutting out the middlemen in journalism. The online medium of the blog allowed the writers to share their narratives with the wider public, especially the West. Written in English, their posts became a matter of interest for the world media, aid workers and foreign governments. Pax attacks international and local media for failing to report important happenings. The ability of people to use the internet to bypass traditional organizations with different priorities has made a significant difference. It undermines the role of gatekeeper of traditional news media and other international organizations, argues Reynolds.

The immediacy and accessibility of such forms distinguished them from accounts of previous wars, and enabled a new level of interactivity since many readers contacted the bloggers within hours to discuss issues raised by the blog entries. Since the war was mediated in new ways, readers were able to perceive war from previously unavailable perspectives. (Pitchford 696)

While posting their blogs, Salam Pax and Riverbend referred to the other blogs, provided hyperlinks for greater authenticity and interacted with their readers almost daily even during bombardments. No piece of news reporting could match up to these blogs as the blogosphere lent immediacy and vividness to the events and facilitated discussions. In this way, they laid the foundation of a kind of “citizen journalism” in the Arabic blogosphere. More importantly, these blogs served as bridges between the Iraqi and Western populace. The American masses, fed on biased media information, were unfortunately ignorant of world affairs and tempted to believe in the superiority of their nation.

The War up Close

Pax and Riverbend present the naked truth of war unlike the sanitized versions offered by Western media. Pax’s blog covers war in a unique way. It records in real-time the experience of being in Baghdad during the bombing raids that marked the beginning of the Coalition

invasion of 2003. For example, at 3.13 PM on March 21, 2003: “The most disturbing news today has come from Al-Jazeera. They said that nine B52 bombers have left the airfield in Britain and are flying “presumably” towards Iraq. As if they would be doing a spin around the block! Anyway, they have six hours to get here” (Pax). After the raid, he and his friend would go out, take stock of the situation and click pictures. They managed to report events even before news channels were able to air them. This live reporting enabled his readers to fully comprehend the term “collateral damage” and unravelled the politics of casual war terminology. “Pax is a stunning example of synchronic connections between the virtual and the material worlds that can be wired through online life writing. Pax’s taste, desires, and disorders, his belly and his bowels, are signs of a human presence and local habitation in Baghdad that was erased in pro-invasion propaganda at the time” (Whitlock 2).

Pax’s blog also makes use of synesthesia, “You can hear the sound of the planes. Look this is what you hear” (Pax). Riverbend reminds the world that Bush was not fighting the war in some distant mountains or barren deserts. In her post on September 12, 2003, she poignantly says, “The frontline is our homes...the “collateral damage” are our friends and families” (Riverbend). The dated entries and the two-way communication with the readers make war a tangible reality rather than a distant abstraction. In her analysis, Jenna Pitchford observes, “Developments in communication technologies, and the subsequent proliferation of Iraq War bloggers, resulted in the birth of a new virtual Iraqi. In this conflict, technology did not render Iraqis invisible but rather provided them with a framework in which to communicate their stories and reclaim their visibility” (702). It helps the reader to empathize with the victims of war and not be swept away by the rant of war propagandists. In her post-dated October 18, 2003, Riverbend ironically comments on the way the war had derailed life in Iraq. In response to “how was your day, dear?” one can expect an answer “that varies from stories of abductions and hijackings to demonstrations, to empty gas cylinders and burned-out water pumps” (Riverbend). She chronicles the subhuman conditions under which Iraqis had to live post-occupation. The bombing raids, abduction of family members, illegal detentions, harassment at innumerable check-posts, displacement, feeling of insecurity and the

lurking shadow of death accompanied by a shortage of power, gasoline, skyrocketing prices and black marketing became the norm. She gives a vivid description of bombing raids and ironically makes them sound like a daily routine.

If you are close enough, the first sound is that of an earsplitting blast and the sounds that follow are of a rain of glass, shrapnel and other sharp things. Then the wails begin—the shrill mechanical wails of an occasional ambulance combined with the wail of car alarms from neighbouring vehicles and finally the wail of people trying to sort out their dead and dying from the debris. (Riverbend)

While Pax's blog focuses on reporting happenings accurately, Riverbend's text gives way to long contemplative passages in her characteristic style. Most of them are sombre reflections on death.

We learned that while life is not fair, death is even less fair – it takes the good people. Even in death, you can be unlucky. Lucky ones die a “normal” death. A familiar death of cancer, or a heart attack, or stroke. Unlucky ones have to be collected in bits and pieces. Their families trying to bury what can be salvaged and scrapped off of streets that have seen so much blood, it is a wonder they are not red.” (Riverbend)

War's Other Voices

Pax and Riverbend emerge as informed citizens of Iraq. They exhibit great insight into global and local politics and construct counternarratives through their blogs. Pax is critical of Saddam's regime but disagrees with the way the US has dealt with the crisis in Iraq. He criticizes the US abandonment of Iraq after the Gulf War when it was easy to remove Saddam. According to Raymond Hinnebusch, an expert in international relations and Middle East studies, the US claimed to be a well-wisher of Iraq and attacked it “to remove a brutal dictator and spread democracy that would benefit Iraqis” (210). He adds, “And if intentions towards Iraq were benign, why did the US destroy the country in the process of ‘liberating’ it”

(211)? In his conversation with a US soldier, whom Pax addresses as “Mr-Somewhere-in-the-north,” he testifies that any claims of altruism in politics are empty. Both war blogs choose to articulate the silences and gaps in the official narratives. They present Iraq as a victim of the US political intervention in the Middle East. Hinnebusch agrees, “Bush wanted to establish the right to attack countries the US deemed threats, and Iraq, being both weak and easily demonized, was an exemplary case to establish the precedent” (222). The blogs deconstruct the rhetoric of war, expose the politics of “liberation” and term the war as legalized violence. The refrain of liberation versus occupation runs through Riverbend’s blog. “No matter how much CNN and the rest try to dress it up as liberation, the tanks, the troops, the raids, the shootings (accidental or otherwise), and the Puppet Council all scream occupation” (Riverbend). The blogs thus provide an alternative discourse in an atmosphere vitiated by propagandist culture. Riverbend questions the US justification for the attack on Iraq.

This war started out as a war on WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. When those were not found, and the proof was flimsy at best, it turned suddenly into a “War against Terrorism.” When links couldn’t be made to Al-Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden (besides on Fox and in Bush’s head), it turned into a “Liberation.” Call it whatever you want – to me it’s an occupation. (Riverbend)

She also condemns local leaders propped up by the US who escape to foreign lands whenever they sense a threat to their lives. She argues, “When you put a bunch of power-hungry people together on a single council (some who have been at war with each other), they’re going to try to promote their own interests. They are going to push forward their party members, militias and relatives in an attempt to root themselves in Iraq’s future” (Riverbend). She laughs at the proposal of the CPA to have nine presidents govern Iraq in rotation terming them as nine dancing puppets. Riverbend accuses western news networks of showing only the Hollywood version of war. She continues to de-glorify the war in her text.

Blog as a literary piece has a short gestation period as compared to published work. Here experience is quickly followed by recording and sharing on the blog which in turn gets immediate reactions. As such blogs are generally free from the tricks memory plays with the writers. The autobiographical subject Pax engages with the readers directly and promptly. When a network of bloggers discusses the same issues, a consensus is generated on crucial issues facing Iraq. The informal tone and colloquial style draw readers into the conversation.

Pax and Riverbend are at their sarcastic best when they point out the political gimmicks of Bush and his representatives in Iraq. Riverbend quips, “So now the heads of terrorism in the world seem to be Osama bin Laden, Aimen al Dhawahiri, and Abu Mussa”ab al Zarqawi. Here’s some food for thought – Osama is from Saudi Arabia, al Dhawahiri is Egyptian and al Zarqawi is Jordanian. Which countries in the region are America’s best allies” (Riverbend)?” Her text, like that of Salam Pax, is strewn with examples of black humour. Ten years after the Occupation, Riverbend critically reviews the situation. She writes,

We are learning that those amenities we took for granted before 2003, you know the luxuries – electricity, clean water from faucets, walkable streets, safe schools – these are for deserving populations. Those are for people who don’t allow occupiers into their country.

Those who didn’t know it in 2003 are learning (much too late) that an occupation is not the portal to freedom and democracy. The occupiers do not have your best interests at heart. (Riverbend)

The Aftermath

Having braved the war, what Pax and Riverbend dread the most is the division of Iraq along ethnic lines. Riverbend refers to some news on *Informed Comment* by Juan Cole in which the US plans to legitimize militias controlled by warlords. She is of the view “an armed extremist is going to mean trouble. A militia of armed

extremists is going to mean chaos – especially when you allow them to enforce “security” in volatile areas (Riverbend). The bloggers are pained to see their country heading towards division and imminent civil war. Orit Bashkin in her essay “Deconstructing the Destruction: The Second Gulf War and the New Historiography of 20th Century Iraq” emphasizes the importance of blogs and digital publications as crucial platforms for information about the consequences of the US occupation as well as sectarian violence. The emergence of deep fissures in the multi-ethnic fabric of Iraq worries Pax and Riverbend alike. On the possibility of an Iraq split into several parts, Salam Pax aptly remarks “there are no lines and none should exist.” The idea of segregating Iraq is absurd as the ethnicities are quite intermingled. Pax’s father is a Sunni, his mother a Shia and his neighbours are Kurds. Riverbend agrees with Pax on the issue claiming that Iraqis have lived together before and can live together in future also. Hinnebusch remarks, “The US, therefore, generates not stability but an ‘empire of chaos’ since it is capable of overthrowing regimes it dislikes but not of reconstructing staple replacements (214).

Bridging Gaps, Shattering Stereotypes

Riverbend articulates that an average Arab knows more about American culture and history than the average American knows about Arabs and Islam. These blogs enable dialogue across cultures and civilizations. The authors intend to share with the world their cultural and religious beliefs and practices through their blogs. The blogs are believed to bridge disconnected parts of the blogosphere. Siapera considers these blogs really useful as the authors disseminate information their region to other parts of the blogosphere and/or Western readers and media. She thinks, “These blogs are very important in levelling out the differences and polarization between Western and Muslim ideas on culture and politics, or at least in fostering an understanding between them” (49). Secondly, connecting common people on both sides of the fence, the blogs may contribute to redressing stereotypes and remove certain misconceptions about the region’s culture, religion and politics. Siapera rightly points out that this is the clearly stated intention of many bloggers at the outset and one of the main reasons for writing in English. Occasionally war blogs turn into blog wars when Iraqi

bloggers protest the spreading of misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims by Western writers. Pax and Riverbend respond to the articles and blogs on western media which imprison Muslim men and women into certain images. Riverbend's projection of Iraqi men and women is at variance with the popular images of fundamentalist Iraqi men and traditional veiled women. She claims that women in Iraq were better off than women in other parts of the Arab world and some parts of the Western world. Almost 50 per cent of the workforce consisted of women. They were doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, professors, deans, architects, programmers and more. Riverbend opposes the view that the oppression of women reflects badly on Islam. "It is a reflection on certain narrow minds, ignorance and the politicization of religion," says she in her Jan 15, 2004, post. She quotes Juan Cole, "So, the response of the Bush administration to the September 11 attack on the United States by a group of radical Islamist extremists has been to abolish secular law for Iraqi women and impose a fundamental reading of Islamic law on them" (2004). The blogs prove to be a fluid, ever-changing and dynamic medium where stereotypes are challenged and images revised. Riverbend writes on October 21, 2003, "The majority of Iraqis have a deep respect for other cultures and religions...and that's what civilization is. It's not mobile phones, computers, skyscrapers, and McDonald's. It's having enough security in your own faith and culture to allow people the sanctity of theirs." Riverbend concludes befittingly by juxtaposing the experience of an American with that of an Iraqi in her blog post published in 2004. She compares 9/11 in the US with 9/11 of an Iraqi household and concludes that the feelings evoked by violence are universal and visceral and hit an American as well as an Iraqi equally.

September 11... he sat there, reading the paper. As he reached out for the cup in front of him for a sip of tea, he could vaguely hear the sound of an airplane overhead. It was a bright fresh day and there was much he had to do [...] there was a rising heat and the pungent smell of burning flesh mingled sickeningly with the smoke and the dust ... and suddenly it was blackness.

9/11/01? New York? World Trade Centre?

No

9/11/04. Falloojeh. An Iraqi home. (Riverbend)

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the blogs offer the most revealing of war accounts in ways unprecedented in conventional literature. Blogs of Salam Pax and Riverbend introduce the reader to the little-known wars, anonymous heroes, lesser-known battlefields and implications of the terms collateral damage and insurgency. Blogs have an advantage over books. They are in the moment, reciprocal and directly address the reader. Interspersed with astute political analysis and reflections on the future of Iraq, this exchange of ideas and information will eventually lead to a less fragmented world. The appeal of these literary pieces of cyberspace is never ending as they trace the journey of two thinking Iraqi citizens during the war years. Various forms of life narratives like testimony, trauma, prison diaries and hostage narratives have already endeared themselves to the readers due to their cathartic function. The power of retelling personal events transforms apparent “victimhood into a powerful act of human connectivity,” says Daphne Grace. However, blog diaries are a class apart as the blogosphere provides a lot of creative space, connectivity and anonymity to the authors of these blogs. In this democratic space, they assume flesh and blood and are not subsumed under rigid categories. They act as potent weapons of self-expression in precarious times and even during seemingly normal times. The blogs might have begun as a mere pastime owing to security threats and limited mobility during the war, but they ended up becoming a means of survival for the writers and the readers. In an environment dehumanized by war, this online exchange of feelings and ideas helped people connect and ease their pain if ever so slightly.

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