HISPANIC STUDIES
review

The Representation of Modern Tragedy and Ancient Storytelling in Jorge Volpi's *El jardín devastado*

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Abstract
Jorge Volpi's 2008 novel *El jardín devastado* is an exploration of empathy between a male protagonist in Mexico and a female refugee from violence in Iraq. In this article I discuss how the narrative evokes its Middle Eastern setting through what Roland Barthes calls "realistic effects" as well as through references and appropriations of classic Islamic texts and artworks. The atmosphere is created through the use of Islamic narrative gestures such as language that evokes Sufi poetry, the Quran, the *Arabian Nights*, and pages illustrated with Islamic calligraphy. The novel is also effective in demonstrating the power and limitations of empathy in the face of tragic events. I will explore how the text avoids Orientalizing, to use Edward Said's framework, as it positions itself to speak from the "West" while imagining the "East."

Introduction

After having written lengthy novels about Western thought and history in the 20th century such as *En busca de Klingsor*, *No será la tierra* (later renamed *Tiempo de cenizas*), and *El fin de la locura*, Mexican author Jorge Volpi went in a different direction with a reworking of the *Arabian Nights* in his 2008 novel *El jardín devastado*. Volpi's novel is an exploration of empathy between a Mexican protagonist and a refugee in Iraq. The sections that take place in Mexico are realistic and unadorned, and they exist in the context that a contemporary reader would recognize as our modern Western world. While the empathy shown in these scenes has been discussed by scholars, the Iraqi perspective has not yet been studied. In this essay I will explore how the text represents the plight of refugees fleeing violence in Iraq as both a realist modern tragedy and as a setting for a magical retelling of the *Arabian Nights* with other Islamic texts and cultural traditions. I propose that the Middle Eastern ambience portrayed in the novel is created through two distinct sets of sources. I will apply Roland Barthes' idea of "realistic effects" to discuss how the novel draws from Western media coverage to depict the contemporary refugee's experience in Iraq. The counterpoint to those media sources is the use of Islamic narrative gestures that evoke examples of ancient Middle Eastern storytelling such as Sufi poetry, the Quran, the *Arabian Nights*, the legend of Majnun and Layla, and illustrations of Islamic calligraphy. These sections are tragic because the characters are doomed to be thrown from their peaceful lives into displacement and destruction. The novel avoids repeating a hierarchical and Orientalist relationship between East and West by questioning and subverting Orientalist stereotypes about the Middle East with these "realistic effects" that ground a tale of empathy between Mexico and Iraq.

The framing device of the new bride of the Sultan who tells magical stories for a thousand and one nights in order to postpone death in the morning has been a rich motif for Western

authors since Antoine Galland published the first translation from Arabic to French in 1704. But the magic of storytelling is only one part of the allure. The original attraction of the *Arabian Nights* is as much about titillation as it has been the craft of storytelling. The overwrought eroticism and hyperbolic exoticism of many of the *Arabian Nights* translations, particularly that of Richard Francis Burton in 1885, have affected Western attitudes and beliefs towards the Middle East for much of the last three hundred years. Stereotypes such as the erotic harem, the cruel Sultan, and the wicked Grand Vizier drawn from those translations of the *Arabian Nights* continue to appear in Western cultural production today. Latin American novelists who have appropriated the concept of the *Arabian Nights* for their literary production have had to navigate the baggage of European Orientalism. The *Arabian Nights* has inspired the works of many Hispanic authors ranging from Jorge Luis Borges' *Los traductores de las 1001 noches to Los cuentos de Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende, who has been described in the literary press as the Latin American Scheherazade. Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya evoked the *Arabian Nights* with his *Serafina's Stories* in a mixture of English and Spanish. Sergio Ramírez chose the title *Mil y una muertes* for his novel about a photographer and the early projects for a canal through Nicaragua. Mario Vargas Llosa performed the role of the sultan Shahrivar in his 2008 theater adaptation of *Las mil noches y una noche* in Madrid.

Orientalism is an inevitable consequence of cultural appropriation when a narrative creates a dichotomy between a rational West and an exotic, unknowable non-West. According to Edward Said, Orientalism:

> ...views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West. So impressive have the descriptive and textual successes of Orientalism been that entire periods of the Orient's cultural, political, and social history are considered mere responses to the West. The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and the jury, of every facet of Oriental behavior. (109)

In this view, the Orient is non-changing, essentially different from the West, and existing outside of Western time. The Orient exists only as an object of fascination for the Western imagination. Though Said does not mention the *Arabian Nights* in *Orientalism*, he does take issue with many of the European translators and other cultural figures associated with reproducing Oriental artworks in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The *Arabian Nights* has a complicated relationship with Orientalism. While many of the stories date to the 8th century Abassid dynasty, the popularization of these stories in the West dates to Galland's translation from 1704. The Arabic texts he worked with were the product of centuries of additions, subtraction and edits. Many of the stories are set far from Baghdad; for example, Galland included the original version of "Aladdin" that is set in China. He also added "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves," and "The 7 Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor." Burton's translation in the 19th century was heavily eroticized, thus highlighting the stereotypes of the cruel sultan and the sex slaves of his harem. These ideas continue to form current negative stereotypes about the Middle East.

The novel is written as a series of reflective fragments from two histories that converge. These fragments were first published periodically in 2007 on Volpi's blog at Boomeran(g).com

before they were collected to form a complete novel with two distinct plotlines. The realist thread, set in the present day of the early 2000s in Mexico, is about a political scientist returning home after 15 years in self-exile in the United States. The melancholic protagonist departed Mexico after the end of a relationship with a journalist named Ana and the loss of leftist presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cardenas in 1988. Upon the protagonist's return to Mexico in the early 2000s he sees the story of a female suicide bomber in Iraq who appears on the morning television news. The second thread of the story follows this Iraqi character, Laila, who endures tragedy in Iraq during the US occupation. She becomes a refugee, fleeing from Mosul to Kirkuk after her husband and child were murdered, and then later to Baghdad in a futile search for surviving or imprisoned family members. In Baghdad she ends her own life and kills 26 others with a suicide bomb, after which her photo is shown on cable news back in Mexico. Though these fictional events seem drawn from real headlines, the narrative in this plotline uses magical realist techniques. The novel uses her modern tragedy as the focus of the protagonist's considerations of suffering and otherness.

Cultural appropriations in fiction are not free from the weight of existing imbalances of power between the place they represent and the place from which they are represented. Contemporary novelists often show consideration towards the places they appropriate in their fiction to avoid negative stereotypes and represent the other more empathetically than in centuries past. Theorists such as Michel Rolph Troillot in *Silencing the Past* and Michel de Certeau in *The Writing of History* speak to how writing is always grounded in a time and place of enunciation. Every time an author appropriates a foreign place and set of characters he or she does so from a geographical and cultural context of preconditioned beliefs about that setting. De Certeau attacks the idea of writing from the position of some kind of universal, cosmopolitan subjectivity, and I believe that his comments are equally relevant to fiction. He avers, "All historiographical research is articulated over a socioeconomic, political and cultural place of production…it is therefore ruled by constraints, bound to privileges, and rooted in a particular situation" (58). This study considers *Jardín* to be a relevant case-- here a novel speaks from the Occident, as Mexico is construed in this novel, and creates a version of the Orient-- the Iraqi culture that the Mexican protagonist contemplates. Jorge Volpi has oriented himself as uncomfortably western, "Confieso como mexicano -como occidental excéntrico, en palabras de Octavio Paz- que cada vez me siento más incómodo frente a la palabra Occidente" (6 March, 2011, El País). The details that establish the Middle Eastern setting in the novel exist in the context of knowledge and stereotypes held by the West about the East even as the narrator questions his own ability to know anything about the East.

Roland Barthes wrote that "realistic effects" are the details that create a sense of place for a narrative. They "constitute some index of character or atmosphere… they seem to correspond to a sort of narrative luxury, lavish to the point of offering many futile details" (141). Even if the plot of a narrative sticks strictly to historical fact, the realistic effects it includes or leaves out will have an impact on the atmosphere of the text, and that can reinforce or refute existing stereotypes. While *Jardín* takes full advantage of the opportunity to criticize the 2003 invasion of Iraq by American forces and their subsequent occupation, the main emphasis in the novel is a focus on the modern tragedy of an uprooted Iraqi refugee. The novel's description of Laila's journey to Baghdad provides some of the realistic effects that evoke a Middle Eastern atmosphere.

As is the case in many Volpi novels, the setting is a place that has drawn a great deal of the

world's attention, particularly as the American occupation of Iraq and ensuing internecine violence has made many Iraqi cities well known to Western observers. Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, is a seventh century jewel near the ruins of the far more ancient Assyrian city of Ninevah In stark contrast to its historically peaceful names of Al-Fayha, meaning "Paradise," and Al-Khadhra, meaning "Green", Mosul was the site of many insurgent attacks during the American led occupation of Iraq. After the battle to retake Mosul from the Islamic State in 2017, the city was left in ruins, including the destruction of the ancient Nuri Mosque and the Al-Hadba minaret, and its population scattered. This context makes the title even more evocative today than when the novel was first published in 2008. A Western reader's contextual knowledge of Iraq may be heavily influenced by the many negative, Orientalist stereotypes about Iraq and Islam created by international news coverage of suicide bombings in the country. But in direct contrast with those negative, objectifying headlines, Volpi avers that his novel is about empathy in an interview with Miguel Pato and on his blog at Boomeran(g).com. Criticism of the novel by scholars supports his claim.

Sergio Gutiérrez Negrón approaches *El jardín* devastado from the critical lens of ethical cosmopolitanism. According to Gutiérrez Negrón:

> Esta preocupación activa y relacional de 'sentir cosmopolitamente' es abarcada en *Jardín* a través de un enfoque en el acto de escritura, en el que el autor intenta lidiar con la representación de su sufrimiento personal y el sufrimiento de un otro foráneo, utilizando los problemas y consecuencias de dicho acto como motor generador del texto. (108)

In short, the novel is about the Mexican protagonist's feelings for a distant suffering other. Gutiérrez Negrón bases his arguments on Volpi's description of his motivation in writing *Jardín* from his blog and on the theories of empathy of Susan Sontag and Kwame Anthony Appiah. In *Jardín*, and Volpi's 2009 novel about the Holocaust *Oscuro bosque oscuro*, the focus is on the suffering and commiseration of individuals in distant lands that creates empathy through "cosmopolitanismo sensato" (108). He finds that Volpi's work has evolved from a touristic posture to one that "consta de un posicionamiento auto-reflexivo y dialógico que se vierte...hacia una exploración ética del sufrimiento del otro a nivel cosmopolita" (110). These novels do not engage in exoticising the other, he finds, because "no viola ni hace legible el cuerpo del otro" and thus avoids "cualquier entendimiento categórico del otro" (111). While I agree with Gutiérrez Negrón that the Mexican protagonist demonstrates the cosmopolitan act of empathizing, I do wish to point out that focusing on the empathetic subjectivity of the Mexican scholar leaves out analysis of the Iraqi characters. The novel refuses to totalize its understanding of its Iraq characters but it does still represent them, and with a wealth of realistic effects. Current criticism of the novel does not focus on how Volpi represents Iraq, and that is a lacuna that this study seeks to fill.

There is no evidence that Volpi travelled to or interviewed anyone of Iraqi origin for *El jardín devastado*. Rather, Laila's character is created in the novel through the realistic effects drawn from Western media coverage of the war. News reports around the time *Jardín* was published featured a great deal of coverage about female suicide bombers such as Martin Chulov's 2008 article in *The Guardian* titled "Violent Province's 27 Female Suicide Bombers Who Set Out to Destroy Iraqi Hopes of Peace." Chulov notes that there were four times more female

suicide bombers in 2008 compared to 2007, and the article imagines hordes of grieving wives, mothers and sisters as being easy converts to jihadism. The morbid fascination of television news for stories of suicide bombers is both a part of the novel and also a contextual factor that affects Western preconceptions of the Middle East.

Western media about female suicide bombers often emphasizes their concealing hijabs in a pejorative manner. According to Nelly Lahoud, female suicide bombers committed a small percentage of the total number of suicide attacks during the (ongoing) Western incursion into Iraq, yet they generated an unduly high share of news coverage. Female suicide bombers were mostly anonymous, and in some instances, were actually men dressed in hijabs in order to get closer to their targets. Lahoud theorizes that journalists exaggerate the threat of female suicide bombers because the idea of women committing these attacks particularly scandalizes the Western imagination. Selecting the sensationalized theme of the female suicide bomber as the plot for his novel about empathy in Mexico and suffering in Iraq ties *Jardín* to a major focus of media coverage during the occupation of Iraq. In the novel, the hijab does in fact hide a bomb.

Volpi stated in his blog that he intended to write the Mexican sections of the novel in tight, realist prose and the Iraqi sections in a lyrical style that evokes ancient stories and the *Arabian Nights* (15 Jan, 2008). By creating a realist style for Mexico and a poetic, lyrical and ancient style for Iraq, the novel presents the appearance of an essentialization of Iraq. However, both the subjective observer in Mexico and Laila in Iraq are tied to international political events. Laila is living both in the real world of modern tragedy and also in an ancient story. Volpi explained in his blog that he wrote these sections of the novel as a "voluntarioso homenaje al estilo tradicional de los cuentos árabes, a las *Mil y una noches*" (15 Jan, 2008). It is an homage to ancient stories remade from media coverage critical of the occupation of Iraq.

There are a number of Islamic gestures in the novel such as Arabic calligraphy used as page decoration, Sufi-style refrains, invocations of "el Profeta" and "Dios de la misericordia," and finally the character of a djinn. The Arabic script illustrations on many of the pages and the cover also serve as realistic effects: they are details that establish a sense of place. The first edition in hardback of the novel has a cover made up of Islamic calligraphy that forms the shape of a lion. The inscription is about Ali, the 4th Caliph and first Imam of Shia Islam, the branch of the faith prevalent in Iran and parts of Iraq. His name is often written in the shape of a lion by Shia calligraphers. At the bottom of each section of text is an Arabic letter and at the end of certain sections is the imprint of a large stylized word.

Among some of the Sufi-style refrains that begin text fragments are Arabic inscriptions that could be interpreted as decorations to the novel; indeed, the Arabic words themselves seem unrelated to the content of the narrative. Sufism is Islamic mysticism and both Sunnis and Shia have Sufic traditions. The most famous practitioner of Sufi poetry is the 13th century Persian poet Rumi, and many sections of *Jardín* are indebted to his poetic style. Even though they serve as realistic effects to the Western reader, the illustrations and the lyrical style in *Jardín* are tied to meaningful Middle Eastern cultural markers. At first glance the artwork in the novel is made up of simple decorations selected by the Alfaguara in-house graphic designer, Eduardo Téllez, and many illustrations are related to Sufic poetry and therefore also connect with the narrative. All of these particular illustrations can be found in *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy* by Abdelkebir Khatabi and Mohammed Sijelmassi, which is a widely available, large format book of photography first published in 1976. The illustrations in the first edition

of the novel are all legible Arabic texts written in different styles with their own histories and connections to disparate parts of the Islamic world. While Gutierrez Negrón and Volpi concur that the novel is about the empathetic reaction of the Mexican narrator, the title of the book, the cover, and all of the illustrations point towards the Iraqi thread of the novel as being the more central of the two.

Layla's name, which means "night" in Arabic, seems to be drawn from "*Alf Layla wa Layla*" the Arabic title of the *Arabian Nights*. It is also clearly inspired by the novel's epigraphs. The first epigraph is attributed to the legend of the two lovers "Majnun" ("madman" in Arabic) and "Layla", who protagonize the most popular version of this legend written in the 12th century by the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi. The epigraph reads, "Dios sane a los enfermos de Irak, que yo me compadezco" (7). The epigraph serves as a realistic effect, highlighting the ancient roots of the Islamic civilization that is the setting of the novel, while also alluding to the enduring tragedy of lost love like that suffered by Romeo and Juliet. In most variations of the story Majnun wanders the desert, mad with love for Layla who has been forced to marry another. Eventually she dies and Majnun carves a poem upon her tombstone before dying himself. There is an obvious symmetry between Volpi's protagonist's narration of his grief and empathy after the death of Laila with this ancient story of lost Majnun, mad with grief, who carves a poem into the tomb of Layla.

The second epigraph is an invocation to Allah, who is called "El clemente, el misericordioso:" who "prometiste un jardín para los justos" (8). Here the text mimics the invocations of 113 of the 114 chapters of the Quran. In another the message is, "Nombre: El infierno por tu nombre" (181) which may imply the name of Allah. Gutiérrez Negrón describes these epigraphs as being "una voz metanarrativa que parecería pertenecerle al Volpi-autor" (114). These sections appear to come from a place other than the Mexican protagonist and the lyrical omniscient narrator of Laila's story: they seem to mimic short Sufi or Quranic phrases. Others begin with a concepts such as "Libro: Las religiones del Libro también veneran las erratas" (127) where the book implied is the Quran or "Inocentes: No hay crimen: los inocentes irán de cualquier modo al paraíso" (60) which brings to mind martyrdom. The fragments' writing style conveys a distant otherness of thought that seems to be fixed outside of Western time.

El jardín devastado draws particularly from two stories from the *Arabian Nights*, the "Story of the Talking Bird," also known as the "Story of Two Sisters Who Were Jealous of their Younger Sister" and the "Story of the Fisherman and the Djinn." In the former tale, three siblings-- two princes Bahman and Perviz and princess Perizaide--- are raised as commoners by the royal groundskeeper. They are ignorant of their royal lineage due to the intrigues of some wicked aunts. These three are raised in a beautiful garden, and though the two princes are older, the princess is the cleverest and the bravest and it is her adventures that come to predominate in the tale. The Princess meets a holy woman who tells her of a talking bird, golden water and a singing tree on a distant mountaintop. The Princes both die on a quest to acquire the treasures; they are turned to black stones when they hear terrifying voices on their ascent and turn around. The Princess follows them and receives help from a Dervish and later from the talking bird to acquire the other treasures and then use the water to bring the Princes back to life. The word "Dervish" is a Persian word for poor and is commonly used to describe Sufis. After a while the Princes meet the Emperor while hunting and invite him back to their garden home where the talking bird reveals the secret of their parentage. The story ends with family reconciliation and a triumphal journey back to the capital.

Various important plot points in the story of Laila are drawn from the "Story of the Talking Bird." Laila is the third child, a sister to two older brothers who have disappeared. Both of the brothers are victims of a terrible fate and the sister is drawn into a hopeless search for them. While *Jardín* appropriates the plot's more terrifying elements, it eschews the magic that leads to a happy family reconciliation. The magic offered to Laila is only of a destructive nature.

In the sections set in Iraq, the narrative voice is marked by lyricism and fantasy, as if it were another story from the *Arabian Nights*. The Iraq sections are in a fixed, ancient, and predestined world that the occupying American soldiers have blundered into. In the first chapter of the Iraq thread of the narrative, Laila's backstory is revealed. She grew up in Mosul with her parents and brothers, a talented child who performed Mozart on a flute to audiences of Arabs, Kurds, Sunni and Shia. At 19 she was married and had a young daughter named Fariza. Though she was forced into marriage, she otherwise led a fairly Westernized life, "casi nunca se cubría la cabeza- ... usaba pantalones, estudiaba informática, adoraba la flauta y se sabía guapa e independiente" (42). One way of interpreting the title of the novel is that the garden that was devastated was the dream of a prosperous, independent and modern Middle East.

Her father, a doctor named Karim, is described as either a good man or as a henchman for Saddam Hussein:

> Se dice - aunque sólo Dios es testigo- que el doctor Karim se desvivía por sanar y consolar a sus pacientes sin reparar en su raza, credo, o costumbres. Otros afirman que el doctor Karim gozaba de la confianza de Uday, el hijo mayor del Abominable... Al parecer era responsable de borrar las llagas que el mal humor de Uday imprimía en la piel de sus mujeres. (18)

This quote reinforces the feeling that the Middle East in the novel is contemporaneous, but that absolute certainties are unavailable. The narrative leaves uncertain whether the doctor was a good man, a bad man, or both. This ambiguity is typical throughout the narrative and is even more powerfully represented when sweet, tragic Laila is also the perpetrator of a devastating terrorist attack.

A Kurdish peshmerga fighter murdered Laila's father, husband and daughter in the first days of the war and she flees Mosul, "escoltada por un djinn que encontró en el camino" (18-19). On the road from Mosul to Baghdad, Laila discovers this djinn buried in the sand, "De entre la arena surgió el cuerpo maltrecho de un djinn- verde y magullado- atado de brazos y piernas" (55). Volpi recognized in his interview with Pato that the terrible djinn was a central part of his "voluntarioso homenaje" to the *Arabian Nights*. Like in the original, the djinn is a dangerous and chaotic creature. This plot in *Jardín* is drawn from the story of the "Fisherman and the Djinn" and it also favors the more terrifying and destructive aspects of the tale while leaving out the fisherman's fortunate ending. In the original, the fisherman unleashes a terrible djinn from a copper bottle who, instead of granting him a wish, asks him to choose how he shall die. The fisherman cunningly asks the djinn how he could have fit into such a small container and the proud djinn re-enters the bottle to show him, allowing the fisherman to seal him back up. To secure his release, the djinn must then swear an oath to protect and help the fisherman. His reward is to be shown a lake where there are four kinds of fishes, representing the four faiths of the Middle East, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. The Sultan then pays the fisherman greatly for catching the fish and bringing them to his table.

This djinn, however, is not a terrible and mighty creature, and indeed, he is not confined to a lamp; rather, he has been tied up and buried. The text does not state that she discovers a djinn, but that she discovers the body of a djinn in the sand, implying the discovery of an unmarked grave. His torment and burial evoke the disappearances, mass murders, and random violence perpetrated by many different factions of Iraq during the occupation. Like the djinn's terrible question to the fisherman, Laila is asked to choose the manner of her own death, but she tells him her tragic story and he takes pity on her. The act of storytelling saves her from immediate death: the djinn offers her three wishes, after which she must die. In her first wish the djinn escorts her to her husband's family home in Kirkuk, a city in Kurdish controlled territory. The Kurds there are taking revenge for the oppression they endured under Hussein's regime. Her husband's sister refuses to protect Laila as she herself is about to lose her home and flee. The second wish takes her in search of her brothers.

When she arrives in Baghdad, everything is in chaos, "Ante la mirada indiferente de los soldados, demasiado entretenidos con su triunfo, cientos de jóvenes sin fe y sin memoria arrasan la ciudad e imponen el gobierno de la nada... Ésta es la paz que los salvadores prometieron" (135). There in Baghdad her brother Walid has been confined by US forces in a prison that resembles the notorious detention center of Abu Ghraib, "ese pudridero que tanto complacía al Abominable y hoy tanto complace a los invasores" (165). The scene directly recreates the news coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal revealed by CBS television in 2004. The realistic effects in the book evoke the infamous digital photographs of nude prisoners humiliated and threatened by dogs while US soldiers smile and mug for the camera. Walid recalls with shame a female soldier laughing at his nudity: "...se burlaba a carcajadas" (159).

Perhaps through the connection with her other brother Bashir or perhaps by means of the djinn, Laila arms herself for the climax of the novel outside the gates of the prison, although how she acquires the bomb is not explained. She presents herself to the guards, asking in English for her brother, "Al final de la tarde el marine la conduce a un apartado y le dice con cierta simpatía: vuelva mañana" (179). She declares that she won't leave until she is allowed to pass. So she sits on the ground and plays her flute. The djinn appears and tells her that it is time for her to die and she assents, "La explosión destroza su cuerpo en un segundo- la alabanza a Dios, Señor de los Mundos, el Clemente, el Misericordioso- y se termina con su dolor" (179). Twenty six others are killed, including children and the elderly. The protagonist states, "El rostro de Laila es visto en todo el mundo (incluso aquí en mi cuarto)" (179). While the magic presence of the djinn and the invocation of el Misericordioso points towards the Orientalist stereotypes of an exotic and magical Middle East, the contemporaneity of her committing a suicide bombing and the framing device of the television report subverts the possibility of reading the text as Orientalist. The text does not pretend to understand and explain the reality of Laila's final moments, and the Mexican protagonist's only perspective on Laila comes from watching the TV report. Nevertheless, the reality of the violence of Laila's suicide bombing is represented in the novel, as is the misery of the internecine violence between religious and ethnic factions and the heavy weight of US occupation.

As is pointed out by Gutiérrez Negrón, the point of the narrative is an exercise in exploring tragedy, from the close unraveling of the protagonist's life with Ana to the distant end of Laila's life. Gutiérrez Negrón focuses on the Mexican protagonist's experience, particularly the pain that he feels for his estranged lover Ana and how it resonates with his empathy for the distant pain suffered by Laila. He is focused on the personal pain of his lost relationshop with Ana

when he is distracted by the appearance of Laila's distant immolating grief on the morning news. He wonders about Laila's journey from Mosul to Baghdad. He imagines "Cuántos kilómetros sin voz, cuántos pasos, cuántas jornadas de sed y de ventisca." Then he prays for her thinking about which direction is Mecca "A ti, Rey del Día del Juicio, pido ayuda... Condúcela por el recto camino" (12). The ruminations "Rey del Día del Juicio" and "el recto camino" are verbatim translations of phrases 1:4 and 1:6 from the first chapter of the Quran. He tries to imagine how they connect, "Caminas descalza, Laila, sobre las ruinas de tu patria. ¿Algo nos une? Tu andar de noche" (25). His powerful reaction to Laila's story confuses him, "¿Por qué habría de dolerme una muchacha iraquí en medio del desierto?" (36). Clearly, the narrator is empathetic of Laila's grief and astonished at the cathartic manner of her death.

The protagonist is interested in whether he has the right to tell a story that is not his own. "Indemne: Esta historia no me pertenece. Puedo negarlo, invocar el arte o el poder de las mentiras, la ética superior de los profetas (o los necios). Pero esta historia no me pertenece. Al contarla traiciono su confianza. Banalizo su dolor o lo corrompo. No saldré indemne" (163). He is showing awareness of the problematic nature of telling a borrowed cultural narrative like the story of Laila. He says, "Intransferible: Un dolor intransferible. Su dolor. Jamás el mío"(168). These sections demonstrate the affinity felt by the protagonist for the tragic life and miserable death of Laila while also acknowledging the limits of that insight. He may wonder about her pain but he will never be able to have a complete understanding. These questions set the tone for the narrative in Mexico, which is always based in authenticity. The story set in Iraq, however, is the primary focus of the narrative. It toys with the stereotypes the West has for an East governed by magic, populated by djinn, and overseen by the Prophet and Allah. In the threads of the novel set in Mexico, the writing is realist and minimal in its descriptions. Volpi said in his interview with Pato that he wanted the style of these sections to contrast with the lyricism and fantasy of the fragments set in Iraq. This is because the Middle Eastern sections are inspired by the magical stories from the *Arabian Nights* and also because the Iraqi sections demonstrate some of the techniques of Latin American magical realism. The narrative frame of the novel is that of the unnamed protagonist whose life closely resembles Jorge Volpi's own life. Gutiérrez Negrón concludes that the protagonist is a stand-in of Volpi the author, though Volpi described the narrator, in an interview with Pato, as a distinct character he had created to express disillusionment and solipsism.

A professor of political science returning to his home in Mexico after 15 years in North American academia, the protagonist relates how he had abandoned his homeland after the government and Carlos Salinas de Gortari defeated the opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the Frente Democrático Nacional in 1988 in an election marred by violence and allegations of fraud. The protagonist calls it "Un fraude sarnoso, descastado" (15). The Mexican plot of the novel has no magic and God is not a witness to the character's misfortunes. He is an expert on Antonio Negri's and Michael Hardt's neo-marxist theory, exemplified in their contentious book *Empire* published in 2000. *Empire* supposes a new world order made up of Western governments, financial institutions and elites that use hegemonic control or force to privilege themselves at the expense of everyone else. According to Hardt and Negri, "although the practice of Empire is continually bathed in blood, the concept of Empire is always dedicated to peace- a perpetual and universal peace outside of history" (xv). The protagonist watches television news from the war and seems to find Hardt and Negri's assertion to be proven. He is unable to moderate his rage as he watches George W. Bush proclaim an invasion to prevent

Saddam Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction. These sections highlight a television media vision of Iraq that gradually numbs the narrator into despondency, "CNN: Un hombre decapita a otro en vivo y en directo." (115). His feelings overwhelm him when he is asked to speak in public on the matter as a public intellectual. In a television panel on the war he says, "Todos vituperamos al cowboy y sus mercenarios. " (74). In another instance he speaks at a dinner at his university in Mexico to a group of ambassadors where he chastises the US, God, the UN, the Mexican government, and even the chancellor of his university, though he doesn't mention Laila. The protagonist understands that the United States, President George W. Bush, the Mexican state and the academic elite form a hegemonic Western Empire that wields power over everyone else; they prove Hardt and Negri's concept of Empire. One of Hardt and Negri's contentions is that the figure of the terrorist is the enemy of Empire. A curious new binary relationship appears now as Laila, the downtrodden victim of Western invasion and an eventual terrorist, and the protagonist appear on the same side. Iraqi victims of Western invasion and leftist Mexicans who supported Cuauhtémoc Cardenas are both at the mercy of the Empire in this sense. The protagonist is like Majnun who carves a poem of remembrance for the tomb of Laila, though instead of dying from lost love, Laila dies because she lost her homeland to the Empire of Western occupation. Little has changed in the dynamics of violence, victimization and empathy from Mexico to Iraq that *Jardín* discusses since its publication in 2008. In 2017 Mosul was left in ruins by the fight between Iraqi government forces and the jihadists of the Islamic State.

If a reader were to believe that the setting of Volpi's works is irrelevant and that representation of the other is impossible, then it would be unnecessary for Laila's jihadist story to sync up with the protagonist's political readings. But the book makes the destruction of Iraq its centerpiece, and therefore it is tied to how well it evokes the Middle East. Gutiérrez Negrón makes the defense of "La imposibilidad implícita en la representación. La imposibilidad de cruzar ese precipicio representacional" (115). Indeed, *Jardín* questions the very act of appropriating Laila's story. Nevertheless, the narrative is not neutral, nor does it occur outside of existing balances of cultural power. As de Certeau and Troillot contend, the reader will always approach a text from their own cultural context in which the narrative is understood in relationship to what the reader knows about the place being portrayed. *Jardín* is still a Western book about an Eastern subject: there is a modern, jaded Mexican professor who contemplates the magic story of a female suicide bomber in Iraq.

Jardín acknowledges the impossibility of the West's understanding and explaining the other, but it does represent Iraq through the appropriation of Arabic literary history and through the contemporaneity of the events of the US occupation. The novel is full of narrative gestures that create a sense of atmosphere. It is a "voluntarioso homenaje" to the Arabian Nights that also has refrains that suggest Rumi's Sufic poetry, and is decorated and illustrated with a wide assortment of Islamic calligraphy. The novel also evokes news coverage of the death of a female suicide bomber and reflects the recent history of the US occupation such as the destruction of Mosul and the prison scandal of Abu Ghraib. The book emphasizes the nature of empathy, and how feelings of close loss can bring into focus a distant tragedy. It also echoes Hardt and Negri's sympathy for people who fight against the force of Empire. The protagonist is a Western observer recognizing the limits of his understanding of the East, and yet still empathizing with the suffering of its people in the face of the chaos of a Western invasion. The novel is a rumination on modern tragedy with the framing structures of ancient Middle Eastern storytelling.

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