CHAPTER 3
BLACK GOLD — IRAQI OIL AS A CURSE

Baghdad Burning is the riveting narrative of a young Iraqi girl, Riverbend (her nom de blog) who uses blog space to express the tumult and upheaval that her family and the entire Iraqi populace go through during the second Gulf War. In her blog, which is subsequently published as a book with the same title, she writes about the illegitimate and unprovoked American war on Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent occupation. The reasons given out by the US Government to fight this war are dissected, criticized and eventually rejected by Riverbend as being unconvincing and spurious. Her blog is an articulation of the daily nightmarish experiences of the Iraqi people in this second spate of American militarist aggression.

Riverbend writes about the chaos that prevails on the streets of Iraq as insurgency increases in the post-war period with fundamentalist Islamic gangs patrolling the roads of Baghdad and other cities of Iraq. This makes it extremely difficult for Iraqi women to step out of their houses without a ‘hijab’ and without a male relative escorting them. This unsafe civil situation leads to a sharp decline in the social security of women in Iraq. Iraqi women have been known to be the most educated in the Arab world with some of them being highly-qualified professionals like doctors, engineers, lawyers and administrators. But the war takes away their rights and freedoms, forcing them to confine themselves to their homes and give up their careers.

In this chapter, I analyze another crucial aspect of globalization, its neo-imperialist tendencies. The assertion of American hegemony here takes on a less subtle, overtly aggressive character in the form of a clearly visible military belligerence. The previous two chapters dealt with the cultural and environmental ramifications of globalization, emphasizing those facets that were the indirect outcomes of certain political decisions and policies made under the aegis of this process. However, this chapter scrutinizes the ‘physicality’ of global capitalism and its blatant use of physical force exercised through the exigencies of war and occupation. The first part of this chapter highlights the effects of the UN policy of economic sanctions against Iraq (following the first Gulf War) that set into motion an unending cycle of neglect, disease and death which was further exacerbated by the second attack on Iraq in 2003. This trade embargo was strongly supported by the US
to check Saddam Hussein who had attacked Kuwait in 1990. It was a policy that brought untold misery to the Iraqi populace, destroying their lives while the Iraqi dictator consolidated his position as ‘the great provider’ for his subjects. The second part delineates the corrosive influence of the second Gulf War on Iraqi women’s rights and freedoms. In a comparatively secular society of the Arab world where women have enjoyed a certain level of independence and freedom of movement, the war and the occupation take them away, thus destroying the social safety net of these women. In the third part, an exposition of how Iraq has borne the brunt of having been an oil-rich country is made. The sad reality of a resource-rich country being pauperized and destroyed by both internal and external forces is a pointer towards the irony of globalization that is that now millions of people around the world have little or no stake in their nations’ natural wealth. The fact that western multinational corporations (in the post-war period) have even bigger stakes in Iraq’s oil wealth, leading to the propagation of the Iraqi peoples’ deprivation is a stark reminder of the ill-effects of war as a cause and effect of neo-imperialism. In the last part of this chapter, I look at the complex forms of resistance put forward by the Iraqi people. This resistance has sometimes degenerated into mindless retaliation wherein insurgents have taken the path of violence, leading to ceaseless bouts of violence. By not voting in the elections held to elect an Iraqi interim government (thought to be eventually controlled by America), the Iraqi people demonstrated resistance. Even more unique and effective than violence or not voting is the method adopted by Riverbend, that of writing her own blog. Ironically, the internet here becomes an anti-globalization and anti-imperialist tool that reworks the relations of the subject and the object through an entirely new means of communication strategy. This voicing of resistance is a novel way of challenging and subverting the power relations between the oppressor and the oppressed.

THE UNITED NATIONS AND IRAQ: THE ECONOMIC WAR OF THE SANCTIONS

The decade-long economic sanctions that came into effect during the first Gulf War and lasted right up to the second American attack on Iraq in 2003 had debilitating effects on the lives of the common Iraqi people. The middle and lower classes were the most severely hit by this economic embargo while the elite, upper class or the “nouveaux riches” with political connections cleverly managed to
circumvent the rules and trade restrictions, thus remaining protected and even profiting from some of the loopholes in the new system (Omaar 30). These economic sanctions became a topic of much debate in the international community and visited such unprecedented devastation on the Iraqi society that it shocked Martti Ahtissari, the Under Secretary-General of the United Nations, who had gone on a special mission to Iraq after the end of the first Gulf War. He reported that the conflict had wrought near-apocalyptic results upon the economic infrastructure of Iraq which had been a hitherto highly urbanized and mechanized society. Most means of modern life support had been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq had been “relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology” (qtd. in Omaar 28). The role played by the United Nations came under sharp criticism from the world community and also betrayed the trust that the people of Iraq had vested in the organization till then. It was an open secret that the sanctions which were intended to weaken Saddam Hussein’s regime were in fact affecting the lives of innocent Iraqi civilians. These sanctions had failed to prevent the Iraqi dictator from either withdrawing from Kuwait in 1990 (thus failing to avoid military conflict) or dislodging him from power. Instead, they had had disastrous consequences for the common Iraqi populace. Rageh Omaar in Revolution Day writes about the dubious role played by the United Nations in the first Gulf War:

They [the above quoted words of Martti Ahtissari] demonstrated the futility of a policy aimed at punishing a dictator but which instead ended up making the members of the ruling elite rich and ripping to shreds the social fabric of a people we would later wage a war to liberate. They underlined the corrosive influence that this policy was having on the reputation of the United Nations within the country and outside. All this from an organization whose founding charter speaks of its determination ‘to promote social progress and better standards of life’. (28-9)

The Iraqi people’s perception of the UN was coloured by the decade-long sanctions regime. Although they were realistic enough to realize that the UN was the only international institution that could be an alternative to the US provisional authority in the post-war occupation of Iraq, the taint of the sanctions would always remain (29).
The non-transparency of the UN’s actions and its succumbing to American pressure with regards to its policy on Iraq further compromised the faith of the Iraqi people in the organization to a great extent, replacing it with suspicion and mistrust. Nonetheless, the UN was still seen as the last hope by a beleaguered people. Riverbend laments the death of a prominent UN official, Sergio de Mello, in the attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad during the war. She terms the incident as “horrible”, “terrifying and saddening” which “no one can believe…has happened” as the UN workers “are supposed to be here to help [the Iraqi people]” (8). She writes:

You know what? Something like this could never happen to the Ministry of Oil. The Ministry of Oil is being guarded 24/7 by tanks and troops. It has been guarded ever since the fall of Baghdad and will continue under Bremer’s watchful eye until every last drop of oil is gone. Why couldn’t they have put a tank in front of the UN building? Why? Why? Why? We know the Pentagon’s planning has been horrid up until now, but you’d think they would have seen this one coming from a mile away…. (8-9)

Riverbend goes on to term Sergio de Mello’s death as “catastrophic” that leaves most of the Iraqis “dazed” (9). She explains that despite the fact of the UN being “futile in stopping the war”, de Mello gave the Iraqis a glimmer of hope and the feeling that the “Americans couldn’t run amuck in Baghdad without the watchful eye of the international community” (9). The lack of adequate security provided by the US forces to the international organization is the major reason cited by Riverbend for the tragedy. Mulling over the incident, she writes:

Somehow I’m terrified. If someone like de Mello couldn’t, or simply wasn’t, protected — what’s going to happen to the millions of people needing protection in Iraq? How could this have been allowed to happen? Some news channel was saying that when Bremer [Paul Bremer] got the news, he broke down and cried . . . I don’t know why. It certainly wasn’t his loss . . . it was Iraq’s. (10)

The trade embargo led to the drying up of jobs resulting in high levels of unemployment among the Iraqi youth. The sanctions that were actually meant to weaken the regime of Saddam Hussein were instead killing four to five thousand Iraqi
children every month. Lack of clean water, appalling sanitation facilities, sewage-choked streets and decrepit health infrastructure led to the spread of infection and disease. While discussing the question, ‘What is genocide?’ and more importantly, ‘What is genocide denial?’ in her recent book, Listening to Grasshoppers, Arundhati Roy underlines the horrifying ambiguity of the United Nation’s economic sanctions policy against Iraq:

Genocides are often denied for the same set of reasons genocides are prosecuted. Economic determinism marinated in racial /ethnic /religious /national discrimination . . . lowering or raising of the price of a barrel of oil (or a ton of uranium), permission granted for a military base, or the opening up of a country’s economy could be the decisive factor when governments adjudicate on whether a genocide did or did not occur. Or indeed whether genocide will or will not occur . . . And was the death of a million Iraqis under the sanctions regime . . . genocide or was it ‘worth it’, as Madeleine Albright claimed? It depends on who makes the rules. Bill Clinton? Or an Iraqi mother who has lost her child? (140-41)

Denis Haliday, the UN Humanitarian Co-ordinator in Iraq, resigned from his post in 1997 in protest against the unjust UN sanctions policy. The sanctions had isolated the Iraqi intelligentsia and professionals from the world at large. This led to the alienation of a younger generation of Iraqi men and women who were prevented from travelling, studying and communicating overseas. Haliday foresaw that the despair and discontent of this stifled generation would drive them towards radicalism. There was a strong likelihood that a generation bred on fanaticism and deep-seated resentment would come to dominate the future socio-political discourse in Iraq (Omaar 38). The sanctions were, in reality, creating ‘a lost generation’ of Iraqis who were growing up with deep rooted hatred of the West. The prescience of Haliday can hardly be overemphasized as future events in Iraq unfolded with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy. The rising insurgency in the post-war period can be traced to the destructive sanctions regime that affected the lives of the Iraqi people in ways that were more insidious and thorough than anything else.

Like Riverbend’s blog, Iraqi artist Nuha Al-Radi’s Baghdad Diaries is a similar example of a personal account of a war experienced first hand. These diaries
recount the day-to-day reality of life lived in Baghdad during the destructive first Gulf War and the crippling effects of the economic sanctions that followed thereafter. Radi writes about the extreme hardship suffered by the ordinary Iraqi people during the decade-long embargo and the forced exile undergone by thousands of Iraqis in the years following the war. She expresses her despair at the utter callousness and double standards of western powers like the US and the UK as also the spinelessness of the UN in preventing war. In the postscript to her diaries, written on 6 March 2003, she expresses her apprehension at the ominous signs of another US attack on Iraq. Writing about the newly devised plans of American policy makers of “rapid dominance”, “shock and awe tactics” and missiles that will “destroy everything that makes life in Baghdad liveable”, she confesses that she is “dazed and haunted” at the terrible future that awaits her country (213). “The shock and awe tactic will mean there are no body bags to send home to America. Iraqi dead will be called ‘collateral damage’ again and quickly forgotten,” writes Radi (214). She had foreseen that the dogs of war will soon be unleashed and indeed on 19 March 2003, the US invade Iraq.

THE VEILING OF FREEDOM: IRAQI WOMEN BEAR THE BRUNT OF AMERICA’S GREAT ADVENTURE IN IRAQ

Women in Iraq have enjoyed certain freedoms and rights from the end of the World War II to the late 1980s. In fact, Iraqi women have been said to be the more fortunate ones in this regard than their counterparts in the conservative Middle Eastern society. The Iraqi Ba’ath Party which came into power in 1963 included provisions for women’s equality in its ideology (Brown 51). Despite this, the traditional Iraqi society beyond the urban centre of Baghdad still treats women as inferior to men. Also, the repression that all Iraqis had to suffer under Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime applies to the women as well. After the long drawn-out Iran-Iraq war ended, Saddam’s regime started shunning its Arab socialist ideals to embrace the more traditional interpretations of Islam, thereby becoming less tolerant of female autonomy in the public sphere (Brown 51). Women’s position further degenerated after the long sanctions period and the ongoing American occupation. There are feelings of inferiority, humiliation and helplessness that pervade the Iraqi society in the present times. In such a scenario, “Iraqi men not only feel that by
restricting female freedom they provide protection for the female sex, but also they try to gain a sense of authority and moral order in a country that has seen little in the last decades” (Brown 52).

In the 1930s, Iraqi women played an important part in the fight for independence from British rule, “collecting donations, providing food for soldiers, and petitioning the release of Iraqi soldiers” (Brown 52). During this time, a number of independent women’s groups were established. Among these groups was The League for Defense of Women’s Rights, created in 1952. It was a subsidiary of the Iraqi Communist Party and became quite influential with its membership reaching 25,000 in 1959 (Brown 52). Having been denied the right to education by the British colonialists, the Iraqi women staged massive protests for their civil rights when British rule ended. This resulted in the introduction of the Personal Status Law in 1959 (just after Iraq became a Republic) which gave Iraqi women many rights regarding divorce, inheritance and child custody. It was only due to the efforts of some influential women in the General Federation of Iraqi Women and the Iraqi Women’s League that this Law came into existence. During the course of its development, the Personal Status Law underwent many changes. Due to the amendments made to the Law in the subsequent decades, the judiciary power regarding issues of divorce, inheritance and child custody was taken away from the “ulama” or the religious scholars and coded and placed within the sphere of civil administration (Brown 52). The Personal Status Law, though based on the generally agreed-upon principles of Sharia (Legal system based on the tenets of Islam), did make some groundbreaking changes in the lives of Iraqi women. It granted equal inheritance to men and women, gave women some recourse to divorce, checked the grounds on which men could declare divorce, introduced laws to restrict forced marriage, included provisions concerning child support and drastically limited polygamy (Brown 53).

When the Ba’ath Party came into power in 1968, it reverted some gains and extended others. For instance, it limited a girl’s inheritance to half that of a boy’s portion. On the other hand, it admitted women into universities, government and public employment sectors, and to some extent into the private sector. In 1970, the provisional constitution declared men and women to be equal under the law (Brown 53). During the prosperous years of the 1970s and 1980s, efforts were made to
eradicate illiteracy among women to include them in the labour force as the men were fighting the Iranian forces at the border in the Iran-Iraq war (Brown 53). Riverbend explains the situation of Iraqi women before the second Gulf War:

What I’m trying to say is that no matter *what* anyone heard, females [sic] in Iraq were a lot better off than females in other parts of the Arab world (and some parts of the Western world — we had equal salaries!). We made up over 50% of the working force. We were doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, professors, deans, architects, programmers, and more. We came and went as we pleased. We wore what we wanted (within the boundaries of the social restrictions of a conservative society). (22)

Brown and Romano also assert that Saddam Hussein’s well-known positive treatment of women is not as “categorical” as it might appear (53). Though women were granted the right to vote and hold office under Saddam’s reign, “his uncle and mayor of Baghdad, Khairallah Tulfah, sent his vigilantes to paint women’s legs black if they were showing too much skin” (Brown 53). A major downside of Saddam’s rule was that women, like other sectors of society, were not allowed to organize. They were instead recruited into the authoritarian structures of the regime. This is the reason why Iraqi women were never able to organize and mobilize like their counterparts in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Brown 53). The General Federation of Iraqi Women (which was the only women’s organization allowed) was run under the strict watch of the Ba’athist Government and became a tool of the Party rather than an organization for women’s advancement and equality (Brown 53-4).

During periods of economic prosperity, Iraqi women were able to enjoy certain rights and freedoms whereas in times of war and social turbulence, these same rights were withdrawn by the patriarchal authorities. After the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 and the sanctions regime began in 1990, Saddam Hussein sensed “a traditionalist patriarchal pressure” from a threatened Iraqi male population and from the neighbouring Islamic countries and henceforth, reduced many of the Iraqi women’s rights (Brown 55). As Brown and Romano put it:
Without the capacity and the know-how to organize and create a support system, women saw a huge deterioration in their rights and thus in their quality of life as well. It is important to note that even before these backward steps, Iraq was a model of *de jure* ['concerning law’ or ‘legally’] women’s rights but not of women’s empowerment.

(55)

The question of women’s oppression has been approached from a materialist standpoint by Marxist theorists. They locate the source of women’s oppression in the rise of class society. Sharon Smith asserts that Marx and Engels’ “analysis of women’s oppression was not something that was tagged on as an afterthought to their analysis of class society but was integral to it from the very beginning” (21). Marx had been very brief in his detailing of women’s situation in a capitalist society. In his *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, he had written:

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that [under communism] the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women... He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at [by communists] is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production. (101)

It was later that Engels in his work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884 attempted to develop the theory of women’s oppression.³ The theory that he puts forward in this work is based on the research of the nineteenth-century anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan who made the first materialist attempt to understand the evolution of human social organization (Smith 22). Morgan argued that human society had evolved through successive stages based upon the development of the “successive arts of subsistence” (qtd. in Smith 23). Engels built upon Morgan’s theory to assert that the rise of class society led to both the rise of the state, which represents the interests of the ruling class in the day-to-day class struggle, and the rise of the family, as the means by which the first ruling classes possessed and passed on private wealth (Smith 23). The modern family arose for the purpose of passing on private property in the form of inheritance from one generation to the next.
Engels developed a historical analysis that located the source of women’s oppression in the monogamous nuclear family. According to Engels, the sexual division of labour in pre-class societies carried no implication of gender inequality as the dominant mode of production was the production for use and consumption in the domestic sphere. But when production for exchange with the purpose of increasing wealth began to dominate, the sexual division of labour eroded equality between the sexes. Engels writes:

Thus, on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased it made the man’s position in the family more important than the woman’s, and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favour of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. . . .Mother right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was. (qtd. in Smith 45)

Thus, descent passed from the female to the male line and according to Engels the “overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex” (qtd. in Smith 46). The nuclear family that arose as a consequence of the rise of class society brought with it the degradation of women that was not there in pre-class societies. Engels explains how this deterioration took place:

The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of his children. . . .In order to make certain of the wife’s fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights. (qtd. in Smith 46)

The division of labour associated men with “long-distance activities, external affairs, and products requiring group-wide distribution”, while women were “occupied with daily productive tasks” which required their presence at all times (Coontz and Henderson, in Smith 48). Women were thus confined to their homes whereas men dealt with the outside affairs, giving rise to the ‘public’ versus ‘private’ sphere debate. The relationship between the paradigm of ‘ownership of property’ and the subordination of women is thus made clearer with Engels’ argument. As emphasized earlier, in the global-capitalist economy, land is a scarce ‘resource’ and the situation
of women, especially those belonging to the lower strata becomes more precarious. This is because the subsistence economy of women is replaced by the profit-based economy of men, thus increasing the dependence of women on men, hence, strengthening patriarchy.

In Iraq, the State control over natural resources that was exercised by the authoritarian Ba’athist regime before the war, was now transferred over to the neo-imperialist powers. The latter through their flagellates, the multi-national corporations, were able to exploit the natural resources of the country for their vested interests. This led to the exclusion of the common Iraqi populace from sharing in their country’s natural wealth. As is commonly observed, in situations such as these, women are the worst affected as they suffer the consequences of social turmoil as also economic hardship. After the poverty and suffering induced by the long sanctions period, the condition of women deteriorated sharply following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Riverbend explains in a caustic vein the situation of Iraqi women in her blog entry of August 23, 2003:

Females can no longer leave their homes alone. Each time I go out, E. [her brother] and either a father, uncle, or cousin has to accompany me. It feels like we’ve gone back 50 years ever since the beginning of the occupation. A woman, or girl, out alone, risks anything from insults to abduction. An outing has to be arranged at least an hour beforehand. I state that I need to buy something or have to visit someone. Two males have to be procured (preferably large) and “safety arrangements” must be made in this total state of lawlessness. (16)

The Iraqi women engaged in professions like medicine, engineering, academia and in government were forced to sequester themselves in their homes and to abandon their careers altogether. According to a report taken out by the Women for Women International in 2008, about 76.2 per cent of the women surveyed held that girls in their families were not allowed to attend school. Over 70 per cent said their families could not earn enough to meet their basic needs and 68 per cent said women were having difficulty finding jobs. Over 67 per cent said that their ability to walk on the street as they pleased had become worse since the invasion. Less than a third of the women surveyed were optimistic about the future as opposed to almost two thirds in an earlier survey (Sharma 3). Other reports published by the United Nations
Children’s Fund (UNICEF) pronounce that the invasion and ongoing occupation have led to the deterioration of health conditions, including malnutrition, rise in vaccine-preventive diseases and mortality rates for children under five. The mortality rate for children under five rose from 5 percent in 1990 to 12.5 percent in 2004 (Al-Ali 1). The worsened humanitarian crisis since the sanctions period has affected women the most. Women suffer particularly as they are usually the last ones to eat after feeding their children and husbands. They are forced to watch helplessly as their often sick and malnourished children do not obtain adequate nutrition and health care. The maternal mortality rate which was already “strikingly high” due to the economic sanctions has increased by 65 percent since 2003 (Al Samaraie 937).

In the aftermath of the invasion, Iraqi women and girls have been forced to wear the ‘hijab’ or head-scarf by Islamic fundamentalist groups. Before the war, the ‘hijab’ - a symbol of religious devotion was worn by Iraqi women more as a matter of personal choice than out of religious obligation. “Hijabs do not signify fundamentalism. That is far from the case . . . before, it didn’t really matter. It was *my* business whether I wore it or not — not the business of some fundamentalist on the street,” asserts Riverbend (17). “The purpose of the hijab”, she explains, “is to protect females from sexual harassment. It acts as a sort of safeguard against ogling and uninvited attention. . . . They [the Iraqi women] wear the headscarf out of a conviction that it is the correct thing to do and out of the comfort and security it gives them” (93).

Women working with non-governmental organizations and other women’s groups have been targeted by radical extremists. For instance, Yanar Mohammed, the outspoken leader of the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq received many death threats (Brown 60). Also, a leading woman advocate was killed in a roadside ambush in April 2004 when she was on her way back from a meeting celebrating the signing of the interim constitution (Brown 60). Average Iraqi women fear stepping out of their homes as cases of kidnappings and rape have increased in the aftermath of the war. In the northern part of Iraq, known as Iraqi Kurdistan, the disturbing trends of honour killings and female genital mutilation have witnessed a sharp increase since the war. These practices are found to be more common in far-off villages than in urban areas (Brown 57). According to a study conducted by a German non-governmental organization, 60 percent of the women interviewed in a region south of Suleimaniyah (Germiyan), had undergone the procedure. These women also insisted
that this practice was mandated by Islam and thus incontrovertible (Brown 57). Instances of acid burn attacks on Iraqi girls and women by irate conservatives on the streets (for not veiling themselves) have also increased after the war.

In a graphic description of the condition of Iraqi women in a 2006 report, the “bodies of young women have appeared in its (Najaf’s) dusty by-lanes and avenues, places patrolled by packs of dogs where the boundaries bleed into the desert. It is a favourite place for dumping murder victims” (qtd. in Sharma). It is a picture of Iraq being turned into a seething cauldron of chaos, crime and bestiality. It is not the image of a modern, secular society any longer but of a country wracked brutally back to the darkness of the Middle Ages where ethnic, sectarian and religious violence rules in all its ugliness.

“I JUST WISH THEY WOULD TAKE THE OIL AND GO. . . ”

In deep anguish at the future of her country, Riverbend writes about the possession and control of Iraqi natural resources by American and British corporations. “Iraq is being sold — piece by piece,” she laments. This process of selling bits and pieces of her country is almost like the sale of a valuable commodity advertised in a newspaper. She describes the process in her characteristic black humour:

For Sale: A fertile, wealthy country with a population of around 25 million . . . plus around 150,000 foreign troops, and a handful of puppets. Conditions of sale: should be either an American or British corporation (forget it if you’re French). . . preferably affiliated with Halliburton. Please contact one of the members of the Governing Council in Baghdad, Iraq for more information. (76)

It seems as if Riverbend and other Iraqi civilians like her have only their wits to fall back on as every certainty, every surety and every semblance of order around them is ripped apart to reveal an uneasy, ugly barbarity. The engineers of this entire pandemonium, that is, George W. Bush and his “war group” consisting of “hawks and eagles” sat comfortably in their White House offices when Iraq was being destroyed with deadly precision. As Hannah Arendt writes:
A never-ending accumulation of property must be based on a never-ending accumulation of power. . . . The limitless process of capital accumulation needs the political structure of so “unlimited a Power” that it can protect growing property by constantly growing more powerful. (qtd. in Harvey 34)

It is an open secret that America’s intervention in the Middle East and especially Iraq is primarily “all about oil”. The causes given out by the Bush administration in support of its decision to invade Iraq have been unconvincing and shaky from the very beginning. From the time that the American Government tried to link Al-Qaeda and Iraq in the post-9/11 scenario, it has been a series of misconstrued explanations starting from the presence of “weapons of mass destruction” to “regime change” to “the bringing of democracy” to the Iraqi people. Despite the huge amount of opposition to the war on Iraq, it was through a cleverly “manufactured consent” that the Bush administration was able to garner support from the American public for its military adventure in Iraq. Riverbend shrewdly finds out the dubious past of the American multinational, Halliburton, and its numerous nefarious activities at home and abroad through the internet. A subsidiary of Halliburton, KBR (that is, Kellogg, Brown and Root) is given the charge of handling “construction and engineering services for the energy community” in post-war Iraq (78). “Apparently,” writes Riverbend, “KBR is famous for more than just its reconstruction efforts. In 1997, KBR was sued $6 million for overcharging the American army on sheets of plywood!” (78).

The major reconstruction contracts have been given to huge American multinational companies like Halliburton and Bechtel who have prominent officials of the Bush administration like Dick Cheney as shareholders in the companies’ profits. It is obvious that the American concept of ‘nation-building’ did not mean building indigenous industrial capacity or even reviving those units that had been rendered moribund by the crushing sanctions regime. It was just a pretext for opening up the Iraqi markets for US multinationals. Crony capitalism ran rampant in Iraq as contracts were awarded by the Bush administration to companies with which it had close links. Riverbend makes a pertinent observation:
Some of the best engineers, scientists, architects, and technicians are currently out of work because their companies have nothing to do and there are no funds to keep them functioning. The employees get together a couple of days a week and spend several hours brooding over “istikans” of lukewarm tea and “finjans” of Turkish coffee. Instead of spending the endless billions on multinational companies, why not spend only millions on importing spare parts and renovating factories and plants? (81)

The sarcasm in this observation does not go unobserved as Riverbend deconstructs the agenda behind the handing of reconstruction contracts to American multinational corporations. The politics behind the “economics of oil” is carefully analyzed by Eduardo Galeano in his seminal work, Open Veins of Latin America. He explains the emergence of an all-powerful “cartel” or a conglomeration of huge oil corporations of the Western powers. This “cartel”, he writes, came into existence in 1928 when corporations like Standard Oil of New Jersey, Shell, and Anglo-Iranian (later known as British Petroleum) “agreed to divide up the planet” (158). These corporations earn huge profits not from their parent countries but from resource-rich third world countries. Galeano exposes the true nature of these corporations where the term ‘multinational’ is itself a misnomer. Their multinationality is in fact a one-way traffic and consists in “funneling a torrent of petroleum and dollars from the four points of the compass into the capitalist system’s centers of power” (158). These corporations do not export any capital to finance the expansion of their business. Rather, the profits emerging out of resource-rich third world countries are only partially reinvested to strengthen and expand the oil companies’ networks. Thus these multinational corporations do not belong to the nations in which they operate and have no real stake in their balanced economic development. Galeano evocatively holds forth on the importance of oil as a natural resource:

Nothing compares with this “black gold” as a magnet for foreign capital, nothing earns such lush profits, no jewel in the diadem of capitalism is so monopolized, and no businessmen wield the global political power of the great petroleum corporations. Standard Oil and Shell seat and unseat kings and presidents, finance palace plots and coups d’état, have innumerable generals, ministers, and James Bonds at their command, and make decisions about peace or war in every field and every language. (157)
Galeano further explains how the prices of crude petroleum and those of its derivatives are manipulated by the United States to suit its interests. When crude petroleum came from the oil wells of the U.S., the price was kept up but when, during World War II, the United States became a net importer, the price “systematically sagged” (158). The disproportion between the prices of crude petroleum and that of its derivatives is deliberately maintained by the powerful oil “cartel”.

There are some critics who, however, go a step further in analyzing the deeper and more insidious intents behind the overt causes offered by America for attacking Iraq. Prominent among such voices is that of David Harvey who in his important book, The New Imperialism writes about the hidden intentions of America. He proclaims that there is an “even grander perspective” behind the “oil question” (19). This goes well beyond the usual suspicion that it is only to control and exploit the Iraqi oilfields that America has intervened in the region. Explaining his argument succinctly, he writes:

> Whoever controls the Middle East controls the global oil spigot and whoever controls the global oil spigot can control the global economy, at least for the near future. We should not, therefore, think solely of Iraq, but consider the geopolitical condition and significance of the Middle East as a whole in relation to global capitalism. . . .There are those in the [Bush] administration hubristic enough to think that a general conflagration in the region would provide an opportunity to redraw the whole map of the Middle East much as happened in the old Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. (19)

Though this kind of a deduction seems far-fetched, it is not entirely impossible. This can be ascertained from the fate of the afore-mentioned countries which crumbled when they were beset with socio-political turmoil. The neo-conservatives of the Bush administration have tried to pursue their agenda with a determined resolve, rather a certain belligerence. An assessment of America’s expansionary military plans would give one an idea of how aggressively it is pursuing its goal of “Pax Americana” or being the world’s only superpower. The estimated US defense budget in 2008 was $711 billion or about 48 percent of overall world military spending (Ryan 59). This, according to analysts, is approximately twice the combined budgets of Europe and
China (these two being the second- and third-biggest military spenders). The United States currently maintains more than seven hundred bases on foreign soil, including in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Ryan 59). Besides deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has about 200,000 troops stationed overseas, including in such brutal dictatorships as Uzbekistan (Ryan 59). These statistics give a clear indication of America’s massive plans of world domination. This intention of creating an American Empire is described with disturbing nonchalance by columnist Jay Bookman:

This war [on Iraq], should it come, is intended to mark the official emergence of the United States as a full-fledged global empire, seizing sole responsibility and authority as planetary policeman. It would be the culmination of a plan 10 years or more in the making, carried out by those who believe the United States must seize the opportunity for global domination, even if it means becoming the “American imperialists” that our enemies always claimed we were. (qtd. in Mailer 59)

One of the reasons cited for the invasion by the Bush administration was the “bringing of democracy” to Iraq. But the outcome of the war on Iraq has proved that democracy cannot be forcibly imposed on a people. For a democratic form of governance to take root in any country and to flourish successfully thereafter, it requires a great amount of discipline and sacrifice from its leaders. Norman Mailer echoes this sentiment thus:

[D]emocracy is never there in us to create in another country by the force of our will. Real democracy comes out of many subtle individual human battles that are fought over decades and finally over centuries, battles that succeed in building traditions. The only defenses of democracy, finally, are the traditions of democracy. (69-70)

The idea of spreading democracy by force is counter-productive in that it opposes the very ideals it sets out to instill in oppressed people. The Bush policy supporters had thought that democracy was a kind of default condition to which societies reverted once coercive regime change occurred, rather than a long term process of institution building and reform. Engaging in a “preemptive” or “preventive” war while believing
in the policy that “the best defense is a good offense”, the Bush administration went ahead with its grand plans. The war agenda also included a similar regime change in Syria and Iran, radical reform of the U.N. and containment of France and Germany (Khalidi 6).

A VIOLENT RESISTANCE: INSURGENCY AND THE RISE OF EXTREMISM IN POST-WAR IRAQ

In the post-war Iraq, when the occupation under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) went on, there was an enormous increase in violence due to insurgency and rise of religious and sectarian extremism. In the immediate aftermath of the war in 2003, the majority of these attacks were carried out either by Ba’athists or loyalists who were mostly “disgruntled former military personnel and soldiers . . . made to sit at home without retirement, a pension or any form of compensation” or by fundamentalist groups (122). The latter were both Shi’a and Sunni groups engaging in suicide bombings and terror attacks. Riverbend explains the nefarious activities of one such fundamentalist group:

In the ‘70s, members of Al Da’awa used to throw “acid” in the faces of “safirat” or females who didn’t wear the “hijab”, both in certain parts of Baghdad, and in certain areas in the south of Iraq. Shi’a clerics who didn’t agree with their violent message, were often assassinated or assaulted. The fact that they are currently one of the leading political parties involved with the “New Iraq” sends a wonderful message to “terrorist organizations”: Bombing works, terror works . . . these fundamentalist groups the CPA is currently flirting with are Iraq’s Taliban. (123-4)

Then there were certain attacks that went unexplained. Riverbend describes these as “strange, mystery attacks that no one understands and even the most extreme members of society can’t condone or legitimatize” (124). Such attacks included the ones on the UN headquarters, the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, the Red Cross and the police stations. The suspicion of Iraqi people, writes Riverbend, was on none other than certain members of the “Puppet Council” or the Iraqi Governing Council itself. Rageh Omaar describes the “fleeting moment of blissful freedom” on April 9,
2003 when Saddam Hussein’s regime fell. Yet it was a brief moment that was followed by an even greater period of anxiety. He explains thus:

And then the moment was gone, replaced with a new age of insecurity and a different sort of fear. The tenth of April saw the first act of a planned vicious war of insurgency by former members of the Ba’ath Party, Saddam’s Fedayeen and the groups of radical and violent Islamists who had made their way to Iraq to attack coalition soldiers and to destroy the institutions which the country’s new occupiers would need to be able to govern. It was the beginning of an era that quickly came to be seen by many Iraqis as an occupation. (201)

Narrating an incident of sacrilege wherein an Iraqi woman working with the Ministry of Oil was forced to succumb to a thorough search of her belongings (that also included a copy of the Quran), Riverbend gives vent to the humiliation and outrage felt by the Iraqi people on witnessing their holiest book being trifled with by foreign troops. The blasphemous act is too much to bear for any religious-minded Muslim:

As soon as Amal (the woman being searched) protested about letting the dog sniff her bag because of the Quran inside, the soldier grabbed the Quran, threw it out of the bag, and proceeded to check it. The lady was horrified and the dozens of employees who were waiting to be checked moved forward in a rage at having the Quran thrown to the ground. Amal was put in hand-cuffs and taken away and the raging mob was greeted with the butts of rifles. (112)

The Abu Ghraib prison scandal is described by Riverbend as “beyond humiliating” (260). Giving vent to her rage and frustration at the images of torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners photographed by gloating American soldiers, she writes, “pictures of dead Iraqis are easier to bear than this grotesque show of American military technique” (261). She expresses her belief that honour is sacrosanct to the people of Iraq and they would have preferred death to such dishonour.

The post-war disorder and chaos in Iraq where religion becomes a source of both desperately needed anchorage and an ignition point of easily excitable passions, underscores the gravity of the situation. Iraq is a Shi’a majority state and though Sunnis occupied leading positions in the dispensation under Saddam Hussein,
the Ba’athist regime projected a pan-Arab secular identity. The insurgency and the internecine conflict that started in the aftermath of the war led to the conscious assertion of sectarian identities. The war divided Iraqi society along ethnic and sectarian faultlines. The inability of the occupying forces to uphold law and order and provide even a modicum of security to ordinary Iraqi civilians forced the latter to seek protection from the sectarian militias that sprang up during the disorder. These militias led by prominent leaders like Moqtada Al Sadr received huge support from large sections of the Iraqi society. As the insurgency was concentrated in cities like Baghdad, Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah and Samarra that formed the so-called ‘Sunni Triangle’, the Americans labelled Sunnis as terrorists and exacerbated the ethnic and sectarian rifts by playing the old colonial game of divide and rule. The war planned by the American authorities as a quick surgical strike ostensibly to affect regime change did not foresee the anarchy that would inevitably follow the collapse of the Ba’athist state. When religious nationalism flares up as a response to war, the explanation is not hard to find. Catarina Kinvall puts it concisely:

As individuals feel vulnerable and experience existential anxiety [in a globalized world], it is not uncommon for them to wish to reaffirm a threatened self-identity. Any collective identity that can provide such security is a potential pole of attraction. It is a war of emotions, where world leaders and other paramount figures are seeking to rally people around simple rather than complex causes. As rallying points, some of these causes have more powerful appeal than others. Nationalism and religion are two such causes or “identity-signifiers” that are more likely than other identity constructions to provide answers to those in need. (742)

Religious fundamentalism then becomes the response of a specific group/s to political, social and cultural upheaval when it perceives its identity to be threatened. According to Jameson, it assumes significance as a radical alternative to globalization only when the “traditional Left alternatives, and in particular the great revolutionary traditions of Marxism and communism have suddenly seemed unavailable” (168). This is pertinent as religion being a force either for good or bad becomes a crucial factor in influencing and determining the emerging state of affairs. Religious extremism in Iraq is a reaction to overwhelming, seemingly incomprehensible
changes taking place in lieu of the terrible repercussions of the American war on Iraq. Benjamin Barber explains ‘Jihad’ or the holy war being waged by Muslims to protect Islam from external threats, as a metaphor for ‘tribalism’ where “an identity politics [is] turned cancerous . . . crystallizing around the globe in response to the relentless advance of McWorld” (qtd. in Bennet 171). The latter, that is, McWorldization being synonymous with Americanization, is what globalization largely entails. This cultural onslaught is resisted by many conservative third world societies. Religion forms a powerful tool of cultural resistance that is being used by many groups around the world to challenge the global forces of power and oppression. In post-war Iraq, religion is seen by many Iraqis as offering an antidote to the socio-political as well as cultural turmoil that has increased enormously in the aftermath of the invasion. Had it been only religion per se, that is in its benign, positive, healing sense, it would have been comprehensible. Rather, it might have led to some kind of a plausible understanding of the already difficult situation. Unfortunately, religion or more accurately, religious extremism has complicated matters and created an almost non-negotiable socio-political cul-de-sac.

Marx saw religion as a social product, a creation of man and not God. He viewed it as “fiction”, “human in origin”, “irrational”, “superstitious” and “leading to senility” (qtd. in Curtis 154). He also believed that it was necessary to end the conditions of man that gave rise to religion as well as to produce a change in consciousness. “Consciousness, like other things,” writes Marx, “can be changed by the actions of men, by the practical overturn of the real social relations. . . . Not criticism but revolution is the real driving force of history, as of religion, philosophy and other kinds of theory” (qtd. in Curtis 153). The ending of religion, he believed, will not affect the human condition much but a change in the material social reality was essential to end human suffering. This was because, “the human essence is not an abstract, inherent in the single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social conditions” (qtd. in Curtis 153).

From a Marxist perspective, religious fundamentalism can thus also be seen as a consequence of a lack of access to material resources necessary for survival. The material social conditions of an individual would determine to a large extent his inclinations and if these conditions are inadequate, then he would in most probability, seek anchorage and emotional/spiritual solace in something as abstract as religion. And this would reflect itself most cogently in a collective expression of anger and
resentment. As Marx believed that “religious suffering was an expression of real suffering” and “a protest against real suffering”, it is not difficult to see where the problem lies (qtd. in Wheen). Religious fundamentalism is then not just a response of certain group/s to an alien reality (as in the globalized world) but also a consequence of their insufficient material conditions. In an unequal world and especially in a war-ravaged country like Iraq, the rise of religious fundamentalism is but a natural reaction to a calamitous situation where all law and order is suspended indefinitely. As sectarian violence and faction fighting mounts in post-war Iraq, where it is not only the Shi’a and Sunnis fighting each other but there is infighting even within these sects, the social situation spirals dangerously close to a civil-war. Riverbend explains the ‘difficult days’ that most Iraqis have had to bear:

The troops were pushing women and children shivering with fear out the door in the middle of the night. What do you think these children think to themselves — being dragged out of their homes, having their possessions and houses damaged and burned?! Who do you think is creating the “terrorists?!!” . . . It’s like a vicious, moronic circle and people are outraged. . . . (145)

In painfully convoluted circumstances, Riverbend relies on the services of the internet, one of globalization’s most fascinating and wondrous “gifts” to our postmodern civilization. It is an irony that this technological marvel becomes Riverbend’s unlikely weapon with which she launches her scathing critique of America’s invasion of her country. In one of her blog entries, she makes it amply clear that she and other Iraqis like her have nothing against the Americans in the same way that they “don’t hate the French, Canadians, Brits, Saudis, Jordanians, Micronesians, etc.” but it is the American military presence in Iraq that they resent greatly (13). In fact, Riverbend even mentions that young Iraqis like her know a lot about “American/British/French pop culture” and know all about “Arnold Schwarzenegger, Brad Pitt, Whitney Houston, McDonalds, and M.I.B.s” (20). She even has some sympathy for the American troops who have to stand in the “merciless sun — wearing heavy clothes” and look “longingly into the air-conditioned interiors of our cars” (15). But, apart from these few sympathetic observations, everything else about these alien soldiers is hateful to Riverbend. She hates them through the
“bombings”, the “killings”, the “night-time raids”, the humiliating “searches”, and the long “detentions” (14).

The internet, thereby, becomes an unusual, albeit effective, medium of voicing her personal experiences. It is a tool of communicating not just her own particular subjective position but provides her with a strategic objective advantage. It is a Panopticon-in-reverse that gives Riverbend an opportunity to scrutinize the hegemon’s actions carefully. The supervisor now becomes the supervised and undergoes a critical analysis of its dubious activities that affect the lives of many an Iraqi civilian. Through her blog, Riverbend brings a first-hand personalized account of the daily happenings in Iraq to people around the world. Sitting inside a war-zone, she is able to develop and maintain contact with other bloggers on the internet, sharing opinions and views with them, thus forming a kind of a virtual support base. Her keen powers of observation help her in filtering Iraq-related news being shown on different news channels on television, ranging from CNN and BBC to Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia and seeing the ideological biases operating underneath. She then analyzes these various news-pieces and brings her own perspective to bear on them. The result is a unique blend of objective analysis and personal reportage, yielding a narrative tinged with sensitivity and emotion as against the cold, impersonal and even dehumanized accounts presented by some Western news agencies. The latter frequently use terms and phrases which make this amply clear: the number of people dead in any encounter inside Iraq is referred to as “collateral damage”.

End Notes

1 Subsequent page numbers of Baghdad Burning are given parenthetically in this chapter.
2 Sergio Vieira de Mello was a UN Special Envoy to Iraq. He was highly regarded on all sides and widely viewed as somebody who could improve the complex political scenario of the war-torn nation.
3 Sharon Smith asserts that though Engels wrote The Origin of the Family after Marx’s death, it was a joint collaboration as he used Marx’s detailed notes along with his own.
4 Female circumcision, or forced genital mutilation has its origin in pre-Islamic patriarchal traditions of several East African and Arabian societies, and while some contemporary Islamist leaders condemn the practice, others support it.