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Other Words

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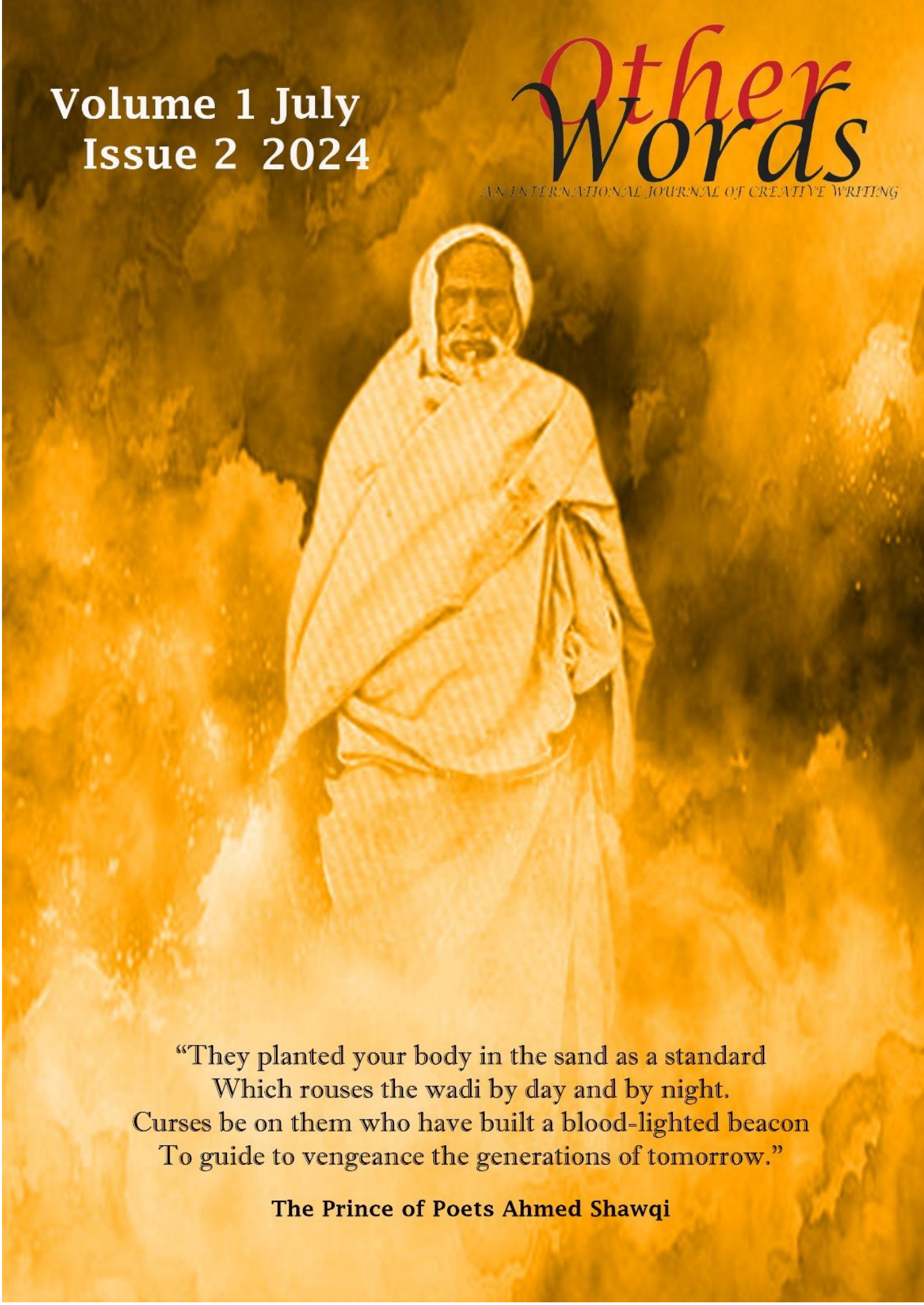

"They planted your body in the sand as a standard
Which rouses the wadi by day and by night.
Curses be on them who have built a blood-lighted beacon
To guide to vengeance the generations of tomorrow."

The Prince of Poets Ahmed Shawqi

Editorial Manager:
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Cover Design: Abdul Hai
Typesetting: Abdul Hai

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www.islamicliterarysociety.com
Email: info@islamicliterarysociety.com

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Introduction

The stringent delineation of poetry as merely comprising rules, rhythm, and forms serves to exclude a substantial portion of human artistic creation: humans transcend mere moments of eloquent speech and poetic imagination; they immerse themselves in the transcendental realm of literary experiences. As I have expounded elsewhere, poetry embodies life itself—a manifestation of human existence encompassing inner and outer struggles, pain, pleasure, and, notably, adherence to the divine message of Allah. Within this comprehensive framework, the life of a Muslim emerges as an exemplary artistic expression; particularly in contemporary times—where many exemplify resistance against the immoral, unjust, and self-serving constructs perpetuated by the West and embraced uncritically by the East.

Never in Islamic history have Muslims found themselves so disoriented, adrift, and powerless—unable to assert control over their own narrative. This state of disarray among Muslims can be likened to what I classify as 'bad poetry'; some among us have succumbed to the allure of Western culture, transforming into burdens akin to those described in Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden". The betrayal by such Muslims is what emboldens the West to assume a moral duty—as purported in Kipling's poem—to civilise non-white races; however, this notion is far from the truth: historical evidence demonstrates the Western involvement in conflicts worldwide and the exploitation inherent in colonial endeavours. The Western world, in contrast, perceives its culture as 'good poetry'—a misguided perception indeed.

The requisites for producing 'good poetry' extend beyond mere knowledge acquisition, literary prowess, or intellectual acumen: they encompass moral courage, principled consciousness, and spiritual depth. Islamic history abounds with personalities exemplifying such 'good poetry'—the life and deeds of the revered Omar Al Mukhtar of Libya serve as a prime illustration. His courage, sincerity, and unwavering commitment to Islamic principles not only offer solace and inspiration to contemporary Muslims; they also expose the hypocrisy prevalent among certain scholars and rulers—elucidating the essence of 'bad poetry'. Hence, the elegiac poem penned by the prince of poets, Ahmed Shawqi, immortalising Omar Al Mukhtar, remains a testament to the resilience and defiance inherent in the Muslim soul: Omar Al Mukhtar

embodies not only the timeless essence of 'good poetry'—but also a direct connection to the literary message conveyed by the 'Other Words Journal'.

The resilience and conviction embodied by the great Omar al-Mukhtar in his resistance against the Italian colonisers resonate within the spirit of the authors of this volume; it is both remarkable and inspiring that so many young Muslims—living in the West—are able to resist the negative influences of contemporary culture with their pens; just as Omar Mukhtar resisted colonisation with his sword. Colonisation persists in various forms—and it is through the pens of our young poets in this volume that its final blow may be delivered; indeed, it is safe to say that the mental stronghold of colonisers is weakening. These young Muslim writers and poets will undoubtedly wield their pens—and, echoing the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney, they will "dig with it". This act of literary excavation—by the grace of Allah—holds the promise of revitalising the Muslim spirit; reinstating it as a beacon of enlightenment for humanity once more. Although time has created a distance between Omar al-Mukhtar and the contributors of this present volume, it is certain that Omar al-Mukhtar remains alive—not only in the consciousness of the writers of this volume—but also in the consciousness of all Muslims. Our contribution to resistance differs from that of al-Mukhtar in one key aspect: as writers and poets, our battle is with the pen; nevertheless, it is an important battle—I hope and pray to Allah that this effort reawakens resistance. May this journal serve as a modest contribution to the battlefield with the mighty pen; Inshallah, the glory of Islam will prevail—as Allah has promised in the Quran:

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرۡسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلۡهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ ٱلۡحَقِّ لِيُظۡهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدٗا

Abdul Hai
July 2024

DOWN THROUGH THE MEMORY LANE OF AN IRAQI CHILD.

Dr. Abdul Wahed, Dhiya Damia, Dr. Homam al Tabaa[10]

As the rain hit the rooftop, and raced to fall and hit the soil, I gazed towards the dark sky, and a flash of memories of the tragic war when I was little came into my thoughts. Once upon a time in the city of Sulaymaniyah, there lived two loving widows who struggled to raise their children together after the death of their beloved husband. With a mix of sadness and determination, the second wife learned how to cook and keep the house in order, aided by the first wife. When the second wife had kids, the first wife stood by her, supporting and caring for the little ones. And that is how I came into this wonderful family, where love and sacrifice shaped our unique story.

In Iraq, we never had a peaceful time. Whenever one war ended, a new one would begin. When I was little, Iraq was at war with Iran. Iranian planes greet our cities with rains of bullets and in return, Iraqi planes bombed theirs. Despite the constant conflict, we somehow managed to live our lives as normally as possible. During the war, we had a routine. Our school had a basement, and whenever there was a bombing, we all went down there for safety. Every day, during school hours, we would hear the loud noise of bombs. Usually, a siren would warn us, and we would head to the basement – teachers, seniors, students, and even the food seller. As strange as it may sound, as children, we kind of liked these moments. When there was a bombing, there was no school, and we all became equals – seniors, teachers, and students alike. I would often tell my friends, "Hey, let's go to the basement again. This time, I'm sure I'll sing better than you." The teachers made an effort to keep things seems normal for us. They organized activities in the basement – singing, reciting poems, and even playing some small action dramas on a makeshift stage. There was even a canteen down there. For a few hours, we could forget about the war and enjoy our time. The teachers knew we did not fully understand the gravity of the situation, but they did their best to keep us happy and distracted from the reality of bombs falling around us.

After school, I would head to the mosque with my bestfriends to pray. They would always tease me about being the Imam because my late dad used to be the Imam there. School - mosque - home, my usual route daily. At home, I have my biological mom, who we call Dla, and my stepmom, who goes by Malika Khan. They have been taking care of me and my siblings since my dad passed away when I was just five. I witnessed them working hard to look after us. Despite the challenges of being widows, they always managed to get us new clothes and stationeries every time. When my foot stepped into my house, I thought of them first, "Malika Khan, Dla! I'm home!" I would call them, just to make sure that they are still alive. I cannot help but worry

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[10] co-authored: Dr. Abdulwahed Jalal Nori is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fundamental and Interdisciplinary Studies at the AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (AHAS KIRKHS) at IIUM. He also serves as the Coordinator of the Centre for Foresight Studies. Dr. AbdulWahed holds a Ph.D. in Political Science, and his primary research interests include futures studies, political reform in Malaysia, and the Islamic world. He has organized and facilitated numerous workshops and seminars on futures studies.

Dhiya Damia Zuhairul is a final-year student pursuing a degree in English Language & Literature at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). She is dedicated to making a meaningful impact through her work in creative writing and journalism.

Dr Altabaa holds a PhD in Philosophy, Ethics, and Contemporary Issues from the International Islamic University Malaysia. His research interests include creative and critical thinking, Islamic and comparative literatures, and spirituality and mysticism. He is the Associate Editor of Journal of Islam in Asia and a member of the editorial board of Al-Tajdid Journal

about them, especially with the constant threat of bombs hanging over us. In every Iraqi home,we have a basement. It's like a safety net – when there's a bombing, your house might get wrecked, but if you are underground, you are safe.

After the Iran-Iraq war, there was another conflict involving the United States and European countries. Saddam, who was the president of Iraq back then, decided to invade Kuwait after the Iran-Iraq war. The U.S. and European countries told Saddam to leave Kuwait, but he refused, leading to another war. This time, America bombed Iraq. After the war, they imposed sanctions on Iraq, meaning no countries could sell any goods there. It caused a lot of problems for us – groceries became super expensive. Getting basic things like sugar felt like buying drugs. We'd ask people everywhere, even in hidden alleys, "Hey, do you have sugar?" This went on for years, and we got used to not having sugar. We started using dates instead. Thank God Iraq had plenty of cheap dates. Strangely enough, it was a bit of a blessing because, back then, not many people got diabetes. The same thing happened with other products – meat, chicken, and even eggs became hard to find. My moms were pretty smart about it, though. They got ten chickens for our backyard, so we had our own eggs.

Malika Khan and Dla always made sure we never went hungry. They worked hard to ensure we had plenty to eat and that we never felt a lack of anything, especially in the absence of a father. Even now, I vividly recall the advice they consistently shared with us, "Stay positive no matter what happens. Everything is from God. We strive for peace, even if it seems elusive. Alhamdulillah, we say, no matter what challenges come our way."

War after war, chaos after chaos – it seemed like an endless cycle. One of the darkest chapters in my life unfolded when I was just eleven. Forced to flee to Iran due to the war with America, we found ourselves living on the border. This time, things were different. As the night fell and Ramadan fasting continued, the ominous sound of bombs echoed. I witnessed people hastily leaving their homes, carrying backpacks on their backs. I urged my mothers, "Let's go, let's get out of here. It's not safe anymore." "No, my son," they replied, "no one is going to harm us. We are old women, and you're just a child." The harsh reality hit me – we only had each other. The army... it was just us. "Listen, I really think we should move. Even our neighbor just left, and with everyone else gone, we can't stay here by ourselves."

We resorted to walking due to blocked roads and heavy traffic en route to the border. The journey took us three days, during which we faced relentless rain and stormy weather. Despite occasional stops for meals, the persistent downpour posed a challenge. Fortunately, we managed to avoid falling ill, but sadly, some individuals succumbed to the harsh conditions, particularly the elderly, who couldn't withstand the weather. All vehicular traffic came to a standstill, forcing everyone to proceed on foot. The path to the border involves constant uphill and downhill stretches. Amidst the crowd, my stepmother needed a restroom break, instructing us to wait. However, after a prolonged wait, she never returned. As we waited anxiously, my younger brother, exhausted and sleepy, seized an opportunity when a truck filled with people arrived during heavy rain. He sought shelter there and fell asleep in the truck, which then started moving. Regrettably, we lost track of my brother in the process.

As the sole male in the family, I felt the need to exhibit strength. Not a single tear escaped my eyes when I faced the loss of my loved ones. Our journey persisted, and after three days of relentless walking, we reached the border. Upon reaching the Iran-Iraq border, we endured a two-

year stay in a desolate environment, devoid of buildings. Nestled in the mountains, we connected with our fellow Kurds. Fearing the Iraqi army's violence, we chose not to live under Iraqi rule. Escaping the country became our best option for independence. Settling at the border, we continued our education, facilitated by the United Nations at an educational centre—more a place to keep children occupied than a traditional school. During those two years, thoughts of my stepmother and brother lingered. Unaware of their whereabouts, a tip led us to another camp where, to our relief, we found my stepmother. My brother, who had crossed the border and ended up in Iran, was taken in by a caring family. Although he returned well, the adjustment made him hesitant to communicate with us. The surrogate family, having nurtured him as their own for two years, felt a sense of sorrow upon his departure.

Following the resolution of the war, I returned to my regular school in my city, Sulaymaniyah. I continued my education there until the age of seventeen. At that point, I made the decision to pursue higher education abroad. Malaysia became my destination of choice, and I, along with some friends, applied online for admission to the International Islamic University Malaysia. Fortunately, our application was successful, and I commenced my academic journey at IIUM. Without interruption, I pursued my undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. degrees, completing them all at IIUM.

Subsequently, IIUM offered me a position, marking the start of my journey as one of the lecturers at the university. While I settled into my new role, my friends returned to Sulaymaniyah. They embarked on diverse paths—entrepreneurship, politics, lecturing, and further studies in the UK and Germany. Our paths diverged, and here I am in Malaysia.

Though I yearn for my hometown, with its mountains, food, and people, I make it a point to visit annually. My life's trajectory has been far from simple—I've scaled mountains to learn about A, walked for days to explore B, and migrated from my homeland to understand C. Throughout these challenges, I always bear in mind that Allah is watching over me. He presents hardships to shape me into the best ummah for Him. Gratefully, these trials have borne fruit; I now reside in a comfortable home, am well-fed, and blessed with the best family—all thanks to Him.

info@islamicliterarysociety.com
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