



دراسة موضوعية لرواية بنت الهدى الباحثة عن الحقيقة من خلال منظور نظرية تاريخية جديدة

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دكتوراه في فلسفة اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها / مدرس

ملخص البحث:

باستخدام التأطير الموضوعي ونظرية التاريخية الجديدة، هذه الورقة تدرس رواية بنت الهدى "الباحثة عن الحقيقة" وتشابكه مع الصراعات الدينية السياسة في العراق في سبعينات القرن العشرين إذ تستخدم الخطاب الإصلاحية الإسلامي لنقد العلمانية البعثية وتصور المقاومة بصفتها حاجة روحية مع إضفاء التنوع الطائفي والعرقي. تدور أحداث الرواية حول شاب مسلم يقع في حب شابة مسيحية تبادل له نفس المشاعر. بعد قرارهما الزواج تختار سارة اعتناق الإسلام ويتوجب عليهما استشارة رجل دين والذي بدوره يصبر على شرح تعاليم الإسلام لها إذ أنه يؤمن أن عدم تزويدها هذه المعطيات قبل إسلامها بمثابة خيانة للأمانة. تحتفي الرواية بمفهوم التقوى بين الجنسين بالمرأة باعتبارها حكم أخلاقي وتحصر سلطتها في الجانب الديني. من الناحية الأسلوبية، الرواية توظف عناصر دينية وتعتمد على الرمزية التعليمية والتناص القرآني. تدرك بنت الهدى الظروف الضارة داخل المجتمع العراقي فكرست حياتها لمناهضة الوسط الملوث حولها. مؤكدة على أهمية القيم الأصيلة والاهتمامات الإنسانية والدينية، مسطرة الضوء على مبادئه وتعاليمه العظيمة. ولقد خلفت بنت الهدى إرث خالد في التاريخ وألهمت الكثير من النساء المسلمات حتى وإن لم يكن على دراية بقوة تأثيرها. تتصف رواية "الباحثة عن الحقيقة" بأنها عمل تأصيلي ومثير للاهتمام حيث يعد من أدبيات المقاومة الذي كان له تأثير دائم بشأن الدين والسلطوية والنساء.

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A thematic study on Bint al-Huda’s In Search of Truth Through a New Historicist Lens

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Abstract:

Using thematic framing and New Historicism theory, this paper studies Bint al-Huda's novel " In Search of Truth" and its intersection with religious and political struggles in Iraq in the 1970s. It uses Islamic reformist discourse to critique Baathist secularism and portrays resistance as a spiritual necessity while embracing sectarian and ethnic diversity. The novel revolves around a Muslim young man who falls in love with a Christian young woman who reciprocates his feelings. After their decision to marry, Sara chooses to convert to Islam, and they are to consult a clergyman who insists on explaining the teachings of Islam to her, believing that not providing her with this information before her conversion would be a betrayal of trust. The novel celebrates the concept of piety between genders, with women as moral arbiters, while confining their authority to the religious sphere. Stylistically, the novel employs religious elements and relies on didactic symbolism and Quranic intertextuality. Bint al-Huda recognizes the harmful conditions in Iraqi society and dedicated her life to opposing the corrupt

environment around her, emphasizing the importance of authentic values, human concerns, and religion, highlighting its great principles and teachings. Bint al-Huda has left an eternal legacy in history and inspired many Muslim women even if they were not aware of the power of her influence. "In Search of Truth" is characterized as a foundational and interesting work that is considered resistance literature that has had a lasting impact on religion, authoritarianism, and women.

1. Introduction

In Search of Truth was written in Arabic and translated into English due to its importance. The novel revolves around Sarah Ho, a Christian college student in a romantic relationship with Mohsen, a Muslim peer. Her character illustrates non-Muslims' challenges as she navigates her personal beliefs in the context of this interfaith romance. Mohsen, her love interest, also attends college and grapples with the intricacies of adhering to his Islamic faith while engaging in a relationship with Sarah. While the plot centres on Sarah and Mohsen, it also includes various supporting characters who play vital roles in exploring the dynamics of interfaith relationships and the societal pressures they face. These characters, including family and friends, present a spectrum of opinions regarding the union of a Muslim individual with a non-Muslim. The conscious choice made by Sarah and Mohsen to enter into marriage despite the significant societal and religious obstacles they face. Their union serves as a lens through which the novel critically examines the complexities inherent in interfaith relationships. Searching for true faith begins not simply as a personal transformation but also as a reflection of the whispered implications of the influence of religion on human life.

Even though Bint al-Huda's novel has a critical position, it is still undetermined in Islamic resistance fiction, specifically within the realm of Scio_ political context. The literature about the story is limited to a thematic exploration of faith and interfaith relationships; no study has situated the novel with its cultural and historical context of The Baath region and Islamic revivalism. Furthermore, adopting a new historical reading is significant in unveiling the ideological dichotomy of religion against secularism and piety against the corporation to mirror and contest the Baathist authoritarian state.

The present study adopts a dual methodology combining a close thematic analysis of *In Search of Truth* with the New Historicism's theory. Stephen Greenblatt (1988) introduced New Historicism as a mode that connects textual analysis with historical inquiry, as the novel is a product of and an agent in its cultural moment. Through a synthesis of these approaches, the reading contextualises the ideological and aesthetic choices of the novel within the particular socio-po-

litical scene in which it emerged in the 1970s–80s Iraq whilst also interrogating the extent of the novel complicity in constituting and challenging the dominant discourses of its time.

1.1 The Life and Achievements of Bint al-Huda: A Pioneering Muslim Woman

History displays revolutionary beliefs held by remarkable individuals since humanity's inception. This was evident in early Islam, with Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Khadija (PBUH) advancing the faith together. Imam Ali (PBUH), Fatima (PBUH), Imam Hussain (PBUH), and Lady Zainab (PBUH) exemplify dedication to Islamic tradition. Muslims, including revolutionary women, are promoting Islam unitedly. Recent examples from Iraq highlight women's participation alongside men. In the victories of Muslim fighters, women's contributions were significant, collaborating with men in the name of Allah to liberate Iraq from Saddam's oppressive regime and striving for the nation's freedom.

Bint al-Huda was a prominent writer focused on empowering and educating Muslim women, emphasising Islamic principles, women's rights, and social justice. Amina Haider Al-Sadr, known as Bint al-Huda, played a crucial role in raising Islamic awareness among Iraqi women. Executed by Saddam Hussein in 1980 alongside her brother, Ayatullah Sayyad Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, she was born in 1938 in Kazimiyah, Baghdad, where she founded several girls' religious schools. In 1980, both siblings were arrested and never returned, with her burial site believed to be in Wadi Al-Salam, Najaf. Firmly rooted, she rejected oppression and colonialism while fiercely protecting Islam. At 14, she delivered her first poem at her uncle's funeral and initiated social work early on, establishing Maktab-e-Zahra, a girls' school in Kazmain, Iraq, guided by Islamic curriculum. Her actions reflected her sensitivity, much like her brother Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, inspiring a generation during her short life¹. Amina al-Sadr was born in Kadhimiya, Baghdad, and was educated at home before learning from her brother after their father, Haider Al-Sadr, died during her childhood.

1 "Biography of Martyr Bint Al Huda," Followers of the Pure, 2025, <https://followersofthepure.com/biography-of-martyr-bint-al-huda/>.

From an early age, she showed a talent for reading and writing, which led to her leadership in the women's branch of the Islamic Dawa party. She played a key role in the party's publications and became a key contributor to Dawa magazine in 1966. Amina Al-Sadr effectively articulated the populace's concerns, making her a significant figure in Iraq. Her extensive writings gained popularity, especially among women who struggled to express their feelings. She was also available to help resolve women's family issues and answer religious questions. She authored many books, often fictional, that tackled the social problems of her time, focusing on issues relevant to women in Iraq. She aimed to convey the Islamic perspective on life issues through imagery. She believed the Quran teaches key Islamic values through the stories of Prophets and that theories become impactful when related to real-life events and imagery.

She was always reluctant to assume a prominent role and preferred to maintain her anonymity. Consequently, she opted to use the pseudonym "Bint al-Huda" for her writings instead of her real name. Like Zainab (PBUH), she spoke out against injustice at the tomb of Imam Ali (PBUH) in Najaf, Iraq, when her brother, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir As-Sadr, was imprisoned just four months prior. Her brother's unjust arrest stirred the people of Najaf and surrounding cities to strike, for her words were profoundly impactful and authentic. Saddam's atheist forces were compelled to free him. Saddam proceeded with a programme aimed at completely eradicating the Islamic movement. In March 1980, the Revolutionary Command Council enacted a law that sentenced all past and present members of the Dawa party to death, including any affiliates. Al-Sadr responded by urging his followers to overthrow the regime and establish an Islamic government in its place.

Saddam Hussain's security forces brutally martyred Bint al Huda, whose only crime was her refusal to submit to the enemy. She advocated for Islam, independence, and freedom, choosing to follow the path established by Lady Zainab (PBUH). She died in service to these ideals, defending them throughout her life. When Saddam was asked why he also killed Sadr's sister, he replied, "I did not wish to make the mistake that Yazid made by sparing Husain's sister, Zainab. The enemy even recognised her potential to overthrow his tyrannical, anti-Islamic

regime. Through her martyrdom, Bint al-Huda became a symbol of unwavering loyalty and resistance against Saddam's despotic colonialist forces. She embodied dignity and the concept of jihad².

1.2 Bint al-Huda's Literary Style

Bint al-Huda's bold cultural writings in Arabic, as well as her direct and consequential speeches, represent a complete intellectual response to contemporary challenges of modernity, secularism, spirituality, and various social issues facing modern women. *In Search of Truth*, Bint al-Huda uses an original literary style that combines theological significance with accessible narrative, characteristic of her dual identity as an Islamic scholar and a political activist. Moreover, the aesthetic by which she tries to lean into more on that later — one that leans on such heavy ideas, is necessarily not pleasing but instead built as a tool for the work she is trying to encourage — it is not to indulge in the beauty of form, because her use of symbolism and dialogue to collectively build more effective allegory through her momentary lenses does hint at a lived-in act of structural care revealing a type of craftsmanship born to mobilise both resistance and surveillance. However, her prose signals ideological clarity over aesthetic experimentation.

The novel's structure is inherent to its didacticism: teaching is not entertaining—characters are often mouthpieces for ideological positions, and its dialogues are theological debates. For example, Alim's speech that truth is a mirror polished by faith echoes classical Islamic homiletics, where parables from the Quran intermingle with contemporary critiques of secularism. It reflects the kind of "engaged literature"³ literary critic Jaroslav Stetkevych identifies in the Arab world as writing prioritising a social or political message over literary subtlety.

Bint al-Huda uses bold symbolic contrasts to illustrate her moral framework.

Secular space is described as bleak and stultifying: The "cold, white walls"⁴ of the government school suggest clinical alienation; the mosque is a sanctuary

2 "Bint Al-Huda Al-Sadr," WikiShia Encyclopedia, n.d., https://en.wikishia.net/view/Bint_al-Huda_al-Sadr.

3 Stetkevych, Jaroslav. *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 112.

4 Stetkevych, 57.

bathed in golden light, suggestive of spiritual and communal warmth. This restoration of binary imagery, like Sufi allegories such as Al-Ghazali's *The Niche of Lights* (1998), supports the novel's key argument — that secularism begets moral decay and Islam provides a holistic salvation. Similarly, the narrative is organised by recurring motifs like darkness, secular ignorance and water symbolising divine knowledge. When Sarah throws away her secular textbooks as their pages are dust, the gesture signifies an intellectual cleanse, a common trope in Islamist revivalist literature⁵.

The novel's preference for dialogue over description is a marker of Bint al-Huda's background in religious pedagogy. Scenes are often told as debates, which replicate the classical disputation that pervades Islamic scholarship, for example, the confrontation with a state official described by the villagers as "our laws are chains. Constraining, these exchanges produce an interaction of ideas that demands readers' ethical reasoning. Part of why such dialogic structures were so important is noted by scholar Kamran Aghaie, who posits that Shi'a resistance literature relied on such structures because they "invite the audience to judge competing truth claims⁶" polemical force.

Bint al-Huda embeds Quranic allusions to sacralise her narrative. Sarah's progression also parallels the story of Maryam, Mary, in the Quran, especially concerning her pursuit of sacred knowledge: "And He taught her what she knew not," (The Holy Quran Surah Al- Al- Alaq (5: 89)). This intertextuality brings Sarah's struggles into a religious record and places the novel within a continuum of Islamic exegesis. However, where modernist writers, such as Nawal El Saadawi, interpret religious texts as critical or deconstructive reassessments, Bint al-Huda wields them prescriptively, with a view toward re-enforcement of Islam.

However, the novel's stylistic straightforwardness comes at the expense of literary depth. That lack of interior monologue or narrative ambiguity, characters either consider themselves devout or are irredeemable in their corruption — flat-

5 Aghaie, Kamran Scot *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 76.

6 Aghaie, 82.

tens human complexity. The Ba'athist official, for instance, is a caricature of evil: "His smile hid a dagger"⁷, without the kind of psychological touch characteristic of the work of his contemporaries, such as Ghassan Kanafani. The prose's repetitive cadence, "Truth is light, truth is life,"⁸ also runs the risk of monotony, though it may purposefully reproduce the rhythm of liturgical reading. Bint al-Huda's exploration of writing and the media was not motivated by a personal desire for recognition or fame, nor was it simply an engagement in writing for writing's sake. Instead, she perceived the media landscape as in need of an Islamic female voice capable of countering a significant volume of opposing and contentious writings that were driving women away from their values and distancing them from the teachings of their religion.

2. The Role of Religion in Human Life

From the start of the novel, Sarah shows a desire to understand Islam before deciding on conversion by demonstrating a recognition that true faith should be adopted with awareness, not blindly, but needs knowledge and understanding by telling Mohsen "I think we should listen to him" indicating that Mohsen 'do not know why you are a Muslim' since Mohsen asserts that he is Muslim by inheriting it from his family.

The Alim's role in guiding Sarah and Mohsen in their understanding of Islam is crucial. He emphasises that more than reciting the Shahada alone, a thorough knowledge of Islamic principles is required. His statement, "I want to guide you, but as a religious figure, I cannot present Islam as mere words," highlights his emphasis on understanding rather than just going through the motions. This reflects a more significant idea that genuine faith should be based on knowledge and personal conviction rather than surface-level adherence.

The Alim presents a compelling argument for the necessity of religion in achieving genuine happiness. They affirm that humans depend on religion and cannot survive without it, suggesting that faith guides navigating life's challenges. The writer points out that scientific progress offers physical comfort but fails

7 Bint al-Huda, Amina. *In Search of Truth* (Beirut: Dar Al-Maaref, 1980), 29.

8 Bint al-Huda, 41.

to address more profound existential questions. They argue that even if science replaces religion, humanity will still struggle to grasp the true essence of happiness. This distinction between material and spiritual fulfilment emphasises the importance of understanding one's faith for attaining genuine contentment.

Moreover, understanding faith requires continuous patience *In Search of Truth*. Alim states that when he says, "sometimes hardship or troubles can be actually to our benefit, indicating that conflicts and struggles may lead to better insights of one's belief. Sarah struggles with her fear of rejection from her family after converting to another religion that her family will accept her. However, she is willing to engage with the Alim, mirroring her commitment to profoundly appreciating Islam before embracing it.

Mohsen expects the appearance of Alim in a different way than his expectation, imagining him as an "old man with white hair and a wrinkled face" embodying the conservative image often with such figures, which contributed to his anxiety about the meeting—assuming a stereotype of religious figures as old and unable to communicate with the young. However, when he arrives, he finds Alim is actually "young and healthy looking" welcoming him warmly. Previously, he held a negative connotation of false serotyping and warnings from his peers who depict religious men as firm, judgmental and disconnected from the youth and modern lifestyle. The contractionary image of expectations and reality eased the tension for Sara and Mohsen, realising that Alim was approachable and not the intimidating figure they had feared.

As their conversation progressed, Mohsen realised that Alim was knowledgeable and deeply committed to his responsibilities toward Islam. The Alim emphasised that he could only merely perform the Shahada for Sarah by ensuring she understood the principles of Islam, highlighting his profound dedication to his faith and its teachings. This interaction made Mohsen change his previous train of thought. He accepted the fact that the Alim should be viewed more as a guide instead of a judge and that the Alim's demand of Islam from Sarah was actually for her, As Islam was for her good. Mohsen withstood the power of the words with respect as he saw Alim's concern and love for the True Religion, which is not

merely verbal. Ultimately, such preconceptions can guide Mohsen not to accord the weight that Muslim principles deserve. It was a case of being caught in a conflict between his predetermined fancies and the practicality of their experience with the Alim. However, as the discussion progressed, Mohsen started to comprehend that being an Alim was not just about the mechanical performance of chores, which opened him up to begin developing respect for the duties of the Alim towards Islam. Mohsen no longer feels sceptical about Alim. He concludes that Alim has a significant social responsibility and that correctly interpreting religion is crucial to bringing people happiness. This shift in understanding is fundamental to his earlier assumptions, allowing him to view followers of the faith in a new light.

The Alim plays a vital role in helping Sarah and Mohsen understand Islam. He stresses the importance of fully grasping the principles of the faith before one can declare the Shahada. He asserts, "I want to help you, but as a religious man, I cannot present Islam in mere words." Understanding the teachings is more important than expressing them solely as worship. This aligns with the idea that devotion alone is insufficient; with faith, one should also comprehend the core beliefs and truly internalise them.

The Alim disputes Mohsen's belief that scientific progress can substitute religion in delivering comfort and happiness. He asserts that even if man replaces religion with science, human beings cannot appreciate the true meaning of happiness. However, this is a somewhat negative view of science, with all its gains and enhancement of physical-pleasurable convenience, but lack of answers to ethical constraints or existential questions – the questions about types of life worth living. The Alim makes a point: one can feel happiness, but only in the context that guarantees ethical and spiritual balance.

The novel depicts education as a site of war for control of ideas. Secular schools are portrayed as instruments of state indoctrination: "They fill minds with emptiness,"⁹. At the same time, Islamic education is exalted as a vehicle for

9 Bint al-Huda, 56.

spiritual and political liberation: “The Quran teaches us to see tyranny¹⁰,”. This critique reflects the Ba’athist regime’s efforts to secularise curricula to contain dissent¹¹. However, Bint al-Huda’s rejection of secular knowledge ignores the power of critical thinking. When Sarah burns her textbooks, “These pages hold no truth¹²,” the act represents a rejection of state propaganda and mirrors the regime’s censorship tactics. Therefore, the novel mimics the authoritarianism it abjures, offering religious pedagogy as the only avenue to enlightenment.

In their conversation, Alim stresses that religion should harmonise with human instincts and nature. He mentions, “A religion that can provide examples and illustrations... must align with human instincts.” This viewpoint implies that impactful religious teachings connect with people’s natural yearnings for justice, compassion, and community. By tapping these instincts, religion can help individuals understand their potential while nurturing a sense of belonging in a broader community.

The Alim highlights the role and the place of the prophethood in the practice and teachings of the religion. He says that belief in the prophets is essential in communicating the messages with human nature: “There is agreement that man requires a religion which will meet his needs in every respect.” This further reaffirms the belief that the work of religiosity exceeds purely academic work, as there are many dynamics in life that society has to deal with. The prophets stood as role models to demonstrate how to live and, therefore, how to fulfil the purpose of life.

Religion is an anchor that gives individuals the strength to persevere despite overwhelming odds. The Alim illustrates how people instinctively turn to God when confronted with difficulties – such as a mother seeking to comfort her ill child or passengers on a perilous flight expressing their faith in a higher power during moments of despair. This reinforces that religion is crucial to life, offering hope and courage during challenging times. In conclusion, religion’s significance underscores that it embodies life, represents absolute power, and forms

10 Bint al-Huda, 78.

11 Tripp, Charles. *A History of Iraq* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 198.

12 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 61.

the foundation for happiness, morality, and fulfilment. Through the dialogues between Sarah, Mohsen, and Alim, it becomes clear that religion addresses existential questions and offers practical guidance for navigating life's hurdles while also nurturing community and compassion among individuals.

3.A New Historical Reading of *In Search of Truth*

New Historicism deals with literary texts as a paradoxical product of and contributor to its simultaneous historical moment, as the representation that confirms and establishes whomever possesses power in the world, as stated by Greenblatt. Through this lens, Bint al-Huda's *In Search of Truth* can be understood as a text that both reflects and resists the charged political dynamics of the 1970s–80s Iraq, in which competing projects of Islamic revivalism.

According to Pursley¹³, Bint al-Huda's writings also diverged from contemporary secular reformist discourse in their non-child-centered conceptions of ethical development and self-formation. In these texts, consistent with the Islamic tradition, moral subjects are formed not passively and decisively, as an effect of early childhood influence, but actively and continuously, through the repetition of disciplinary practices that work to internalise virtue and happiness simultaneously".

The novel treats secular governance as irretrievably corrupt, paralleling the Islamic Dawa Party's conflict with Ba'athist policies. For example, the Alim decries secular rulers as "worshippers of their ambition¹⁴", a frank polemic against Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. This is consistent with Tripp's reading of Ba'athist Iraq, in which secular nationalism was used as a sword to slice through the ranks of religious institutions. By contrast, Bint al-Huda places Islamic law as a divine remedy to state tyranny and contends that "submission to God, not man, is what produces true justice"¹⁵. Such religious rhetoric politicises piety,

13 Pursley, Sara. Building the Nation through the Production of Difference: The Gendering of Education in Iraq, 1928–1958." In *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, Edited by Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco, and Hamit B (USA: Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2012), 53.

14 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 62.

15 Bint al-Huda, 91.

framed as an act of resistance: that to be a good Muslim to resist the state.

The novel's controversial argument against secularism—whose representative lines include, "Science cannot replace religion; it only deepens our need for divine guidance", parallels Bint al-Huda's activism in the Islamic Dawa Party, which fought Saddam Hussein's secularisation policies. Two recent pieces have informed such thinking from the perspective of the Alim and the role of Islam as both a holistic system that challenges the Ba'athist regime's attempts to remove religion from public life¹⁶. However, this also reflects the Dawa Party's ideological framework, as the party employed the novel to mobilise resistance. The text's religious fervour here is inextricable from its historical function in cementing opposition to state repression, a fact that New Historicism emphasises.

It can be criticised for depicting the simplistic dichotomy of religion versus secularism. The novel sets up a simple moral binary between Islamic virtue and secular "decadence," disdainful of secularism as an intrinsic evil: "Godless laws breed godless hearts,"¹⁷. This framing fails to account for the complex realities of Israeli secularists, many of whom opposed Ba'athist tyranny but also called for pluralism. The Iraqi Communist Party, even if secular, collaborated with Islamists in the struggle against Saddam's empire¹⁸. The novel also superciliously honours religious figures and presents them as infallible arbiters of justice: "The Alim's word is God's light,"¹⁹. This stands in stark contrast to earlier critiques of Shi'a clergy complicity with repressive regimes, including some religious authorities that sought to appease Ba'athist policies to escape persecution²⁰. Excluding such information, meanwhile, Bint al-Huda promotes an idealised religious men that describes a cult of leadership under the Ba'ath regime, except religious rather than secular

16 Tripp, A History of Iraq, 215.

17 Bint al-Huda, In Search for Truth, 109.

18 Makiya, Kanan. Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq (USA: University of California Press, 1998), 158.

19 Bint al-Huda, In Search for Truth, 136.

20 Nakash, Yitzhak. The Shi'is of Iraq (USA: Princeton University Press, 2003), 142.

3.1 Martyrdom as Political Resistance

Alim's assertion that "The path to truth is paved with sacrifice"²¹ takes on symbolic resonance when seen alongside Bint al-Huda's execution in 1980. Her sexualised vision of martyrdom as spiritual victory represents Shi'a Islamic traditions of suffering, for example, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala) However, he also reacts to the Ba'athist regime's bloody elimination of opposition. Shi'a authors of the time commonly framed resistance in religious terms to legitimise their struggle²². The novel's obsession with martyrdom thus hinges as much on a theological case as a surreptitious political act of resistance, complicating the relationship between spiritual and historical modalities of storytelling.

Martyrdom is one of the recurrent motifs embodied in characters who will choose death over moral compromise — which plays into Shi'a Islam's historical narrative of suffering even as it subverts the Ba'athist state's monopolisation over violence. When the protagonist Sarah asserts, "My blood will water the roots of truth"²³, she invokes Imam Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala, a foundation of Shi'a symbolism. Iraqi Shi'a activists in the 1970s deliberately resurrected Imam Hussein's legacy to mobilise resistance to Saddam's regime²⁴. Bint al-Huda's representation of martyrdom, therefore, turns a theological trope into a political weapon, depicting state violence as ontologically and spiritually illegitimate.

3.2 Gender Roles and Islamic Revivalism

As the protagonist, Sarah comes out as a "devout Muslim", she embodies Bint al-Huda's vision of women as moral beacons of Islamic revivalism. However, New Historicism allows for a nuanced understanding of this representation as situated in the Dawa Party's gendered significance, in which the agency of women's piety

²¹ Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 67.

²² Baram, Amatzia. *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith* (USA: Washington, DC / Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 89.

²³ Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 105.

²⁴ Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith*, 102.

became crucial to combating Westernised secularism²⁵. Sarah's refusal of Western education, "I sought knowledge, but I found emptiness,²⁶" critiques Ba'athist models of modernisation yet ironically shapes female agency to religious spheres. This duality reflects the considerable tension in Islamic movements at the time, which gave women a representative space to act as a symbol of resistance but limited the confrontation's public roles.

Sarah navigates the pressures of conventional gender roles and subversive agency. Her transformation into a devout Muslim does, however, reinforce patriarchal expectations of women as moral custodians: "A woman's silence is her strength". However, her activism as a religious teacher does contest the Ba'athist regime's exclusion of women from the public sphere. This duality encapsulates what Nadjé Al-Ali (2007) expresses as "resistance within constraints," where the development of religious spaces allowed Iraqi women to negotiate their position despite broad structural oppression effectively²⁷. Sarah's underground Quranic school, "We teach what the state fears", for example, emerges as a stronghold of covert empowerment, outsmarting state censorship and male-dominated clerical institutions. It seems that the novel might be missing an opportunity to explore the contributions of the secular feminist movement, which could offer a more nuanced perspective on the role of religion in feminism.

Pursley stated that a woman's rights in Islam derive, according to Bint al-Huda, from either her nature as a woman or her nature as a human. When the distinction between the two is not recognised, misunderstandings can occur. The hijab, for instance, is often misinterpreted as an unequal obligation stemming from a woman's feminine nature when its true purpose is to protect her rights, a human contrary to Western propaganda and the misguided actions of many

25 Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 134.

26 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 56.

27 Al-Ali, Nadjé Sadig. *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (UK: zed books, 2007), 108, https://lem.journals.ikiu.ac.ir/article%5C_495.html.

Muslim men²⁸. Bint al-Huda explains that the hijab is required of a Muslim woman not to destroy her personality but to enable her to engage in the public sphere as an equal to men rather than as a woman who should be treated differently from them. The woman who appears in society looking like a human, rather than emphasising all the signs of her femininity, will be equal to the man.

The novel seems to politicise women's roles by collapsing religious responsibility into resistance to colonialism. Sarah's rejection of Western education, "They teach us to forget God", is a critique of Ba'athist projects of modernisation, which sought to use secular education as a tool to fortify the power of the state²⁹. Her later embrace of Islamic pedagogy, "The Quran is my compass,"³⁰ matches the Dawa Party's attempts to open underground religious schools as places of ideological opposition. Here, female piety is not just personal but nation-building, locating women as custodians of an "authentic" Islamic identity endangered by secularism.

While the novel enshrines women as moral exemplars, "A woman's strength lies in her faith³¹," it restricts female agency to the religious sphere. Sarah's turn away from public life and secular education, "My classroom is the mosque", fits with the idealised "Islamic womanhood" of the Dawa Party, which framed women's activism as an extension of piety within their domestic domains. However, this representation overlooks secular or feminist Iraqi women who resisted the Ba'ath regime through labour movements or civil society³².

3.3 Scholarly Criticisms of Bint al-Huda's Work

New Historicism refers to the idea that literary works can highlight the era they depict. Realist texts, in particular, offer creative portrayals of specific historical

28 Pursley, *Building the Nation through the Production of Difference: The Gendering of Education in Iraq, 1928–1958*. In *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, Edited by Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco, and Hamit B, 63.

29 Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*, 71.

30 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 78.

31 Bint al-Huda, 82.

32 Joseph, Suad. *Civic Myths, Citizenship, and Gender in Lebanon*. In *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, Edited by Suad Joseph, 107–136 (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 112.

events or eras, while fictional texts play a secondary role in history records.” new historicism is defined as “literary texts are bound up with other discourses and rhetorical structures; they are part of a history that is still being written.”³³. Reading through the lens of New Historicism, *In Search of Truth* is a politically infused text fully immersed in Iraq’s anti-authoritarian resistance. The novel confirms New Historicism’s claim that “[n]o text is free of the contradictions of its time³⁴”.

Despite al-Huda’s empowerment rhetoric, its depiction of women reinforces restrictive norms. The emphasis on female piety, “A woman’s jihad is her obedience³⁵” “minimises women’s agency to matters of religious performance, overlooking secular or feminist idioms that Iraqi women harnessed as they resisted both Ba’athist and Islamist patriarchies³⁶. Lara Deeb also affirms that the novel celebrates “enlightened” Islamic womanhood. However, she argues that its equation of morality with domesticity, “Her home is her fortress³⁷,” diminishes remembrance of women’s political involvement outside the home through their participation in unions, protests and intellectual circles³⁸.

Scholars favouring non-Shi’a perspectives quickly point out the novel’s marginalisation of such voices as a critical shortcoming. According to Charles Tripp, Bint al-Huda’s ideal of unity erases Sunni Muslims, who made up a majority in Iraq and were similarly persecuted by Ba’athist repression³⁹. According to Yitzhak Nakash, the Shi’a-geared dialogue of the Dawa Party, reflected in the novel, created a sectarian chasm by making the recipients of conquest Shi’as frame the

33 Muller, Nadine “Theoretical and Critical Perspectives Week 5,” Literature and History: New Historicism, n.d., 2, <http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2013/11/Theory-Week-5-New-Historicism.pdf>.

34 Gallagher, Catherine and Greenblatt, Stephen. *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

35 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 82.

36 Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*, 95.

37 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 89.

38 Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon*, 148.

39 Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 231.

resistance as a Shi'a struggle rather than a national struggle⁴⁰. This contrasts cross-sectarian coalitions, such as the 1977 Safar Uprising, which included Sunni and Kurdish dissidents⁴¹.

The novel's uncritical reverence for clerical authority, "The Alim's wisdom is beyond question⁴²," has faced criticism. The novel fails to consider previous cases of Shi'a clerics cooperating with authoritarian regimes, such as quietist religious authorities —Shi'a clerics and scholars who, to retain institutional power, steered clear of opposing Saddam. This idealisation warns Davis, risks, by implication, legitimising theocratic authoritarianism as an alternative to secular dictatorship.

The novel's disconnection from class and ethnic oppression. Moreover, though villagers in the novel lament "spiritual poverty"⁴³, scholars such as Dina Rizk Khoury argue that Bint al-Huda neglects to account for the Ba'athist regime's economic exploitation of rural Shi'a communities, which sparked a public rebellion that was unrelated to their religious programs⁴⁴.

Bint al-Huda's limitations are contextualised, by her defenders, in the urgent political climate of 1970s Iraq. Historian Joyce Wiley has asserted that the sectarian and gendered biases of the novel originated from the Dawa Party's need to emulate a unified opposing front in the face of state terror⁴⁵. Likewise, Kamran Scot Aghaie argues that Shi'a martyrdom was a strategic response on the part of Shi'as to the erasure of Shi'a history as sanctioned by the state⁴⁶.

However, as New Historicism teaches, "texts cannot escape their entanglement in the power structures they seek to oppose." If *In Search of Truth* activated resistance, its exclusions forbade the constitutive tensions of liberation narratives that value ideological unity over intersectional solidarity.

40 Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 156.

41 Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, 173.

42 Bint al-Huda, *In Search for Truth*, 132.

43 Bint al-Huda, 141.

44 Khoury, Dina Rizk. *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 202.

45 Wiley, Joyce N. *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as* (USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 74.

46 Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, 89.

4. Conclusion

Bint al-Huda's *in Search of Truth* transcends its immediate political context as an essential text about the relationship between religion, gender and power that continues to provoke questions today. Read through a New Historicist frame, the novel emerges as both a product of 1970s Iraqi anti-authoritarian resistance and an agent for the ideological contours of Islamic revivalism. Its strengths and weaknesses — polemical force, gendered contradictions, sectarian exclusions — replicate the tensions embedded in liberation movements that must dismantle the oppression they mean to undo even as they inadvertently reproduce hierarchies.

Islam is presented as a source of genuine happiness. The Alim underscores the idea that Islam is essential for attaining true fulfilment. He asserts that “man is in dire need of religion” and argues that happiness cannot be fully realised without it. This viewpoint frames Islam as a set of beliefs and an indispensable guide for navigating life's complexities. Alim notes that while scientific advancements can provide material comfort, they fail to address deeper existential needs and moral dilemmas, thereby highlighting the limitations of secular approaches to happiness. Islam is portrayed as a beacon of hope in challenging times. The Alim shares examples that highlight humanity's natural tendency to turn to faith in moments of crisis—like a mother praying for her ill child or passengers on a plane facing peril. These instances show how belief in a higher power can bring solace amid uncertainty, emphasising that Islam is a source of emotional strength during life's trials. The novel concludes by reflecting on the significance of believing in the unseen and the fundamental human need for religion. Through discussions among Mohsen, Sarah, and the Alim, the Alim underscores that faith in a higher power is essential to human nature, particularly in times of crisis. He shares various examples, such as a mother praying for her sick child's recovery or a captain adrift at sea, to demonstrate how people naturally seek a more significant force when confronted with despair.

Although artistically restrained, Bint al-Huda's literary style is strategically effective. Her allegorical clarity, dialogic rigour, and emotional depth reflect a self-conscious adaptation of classical Islamic rhetorical traditions to contempo-

rary political discourse. Although the novel is neither Modernist nor as experimental as her secular counterparts, its unapologetic didacticism and cypher-like potency make it an unsettling text of resistance. As the scholar Miriam Cooke (2001) reminds us, "In contexts of oppression, aesthetic subtlety can be a luxury" (p. 89)—a truism that encapsulates Bint al-Huda's pragmatic literary ethos.

Alim's approach plays a crucial role in Sarah's decision to convert to Islam by focusing on understanding rather than just rituals. He offers reassurance and support, tackles her existential questions about happiness, promotes critical thinking, links faith to human instincts, and underscores the significance of prophetic guidance. His thoughtful mentorship creates a space where Sarah feels empowered to delve deeply into her beliefs, ultimately leading her to see Islam as a meaningful path in her life. Additionally, when Alim demonstrates his commitment to his responsibilities toward Allah and Islam, it fosters a sense of respect and trust in Sarah. This respectful interaction encourages her to engage openly with Islamic teachings, shifting her initial fear into a genuine desire to learn and understand. Therefore, Alim's demeanour plays a significant role in Sarah's journey from nervousness to confidence in her decision to embrace Islam.

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