

Insightful, moving study of the Iraqi Chalabi dynasty

**By Chibli Mallat**

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Tamara Chalabi is dear to me. I accompanied her academic rise from her high school years, through SOAS to Brown to Harvard, where she got her PhD with a thesis that she turned into an excellent book. She always delivered beyond expectations, and I have often been moved by her courage through the Greek tragedy that all Iraqis have been living as a matter of course, and she individually as the daughter of Ahmad Chalabi. I know, from dabbling on the side of Mideastern politics, how tough on family life Middle Eastern tribulations are, and especially admire Leila Osseiran, Tamara's mother, for the sacrifices she made for her husband's dedication to end the dictatorship in Iraq.

An Antigone-like character, Tamara has chosen her Freudian escape in scholarship. "Late for Tea at the Deer Palace," is her just published literary-historical chronicle of the Chalabi family over the last century. Like "Wild Swans," which recounts three generations of women through the oppressive cycles of modern China, this book combines personal vignettes with the tumultuous march of history and the long years of exile and suffering for a family that was the richest landowner and trader in pre-Saddam Iraq, framed especially through the eyes of Tamara's grandmother Bibi Bassam (1900-1989). This book is more powerful than Wild Swans: whereas the three women at the heart of Jung Chang's novel were 'ordinary' Chinese, the people at the heart of "Late for Tea" wielded immense power in their native Iraq. This makes it an unusual hybrid, and a compelling read because of the grand sense of world history it conveys through the Iraqi prism of a Kennedy-esque family.

Practicing her trade, Dr. Chalabi gives us in this book four periods of modern Iraqi history. As a trained historian, she is able to mark each with a peculiarity matched by an informed understanding of the dramatic breaks over the past hundred and a few years: Book 1 covers late Ottoman domination until the brutal collapse in World War I, when great grand-father Abdul Hussein (1879-1939) emerges as a politician-cum businessman with acumen in both. Books 2 and 3 are centered on the rise of his son Hadi (1898-1988), a nationalist figure with strong entries in British-dominated politics, then on Hadi and his family's excruciatingly long exile in 1958 while his sons were being taken to prison. The last book is about the struggle against Saddam Hussein and the disappointing American rule that followed. Throughout, it is the women of the Chalabi family who are central: through their eyes, the history of modern Iraq appears in its immense cruelty, and this twist in the approach gives the narrative powerful moments of endearment, for instance in the humiliation that Bibi chooses to suffer in order to get her son Rushdi out of prison.

Readers will probably turn to the book mostly for today's Iraq, and the role of Ahmad Chalabi in particular. They may be disappointed. There is a decent biography of Chalabi as "the man who took America to war," unfortunately the author did not have access to his subject matter, and the information is often secondhand and imprecise. No one in the world has access to Ahmad like Tamara. Yet for reasons of modesty, perhaps for filial impediments best left for psychoanalysis to describe, and also for her conscious choice to recount a much fuller story, that of her family, the last book is too short to requite the reader's natural expectations to better understand the central man in modern Iraqi history.

A Greek tragedy indeed, the story of Tamara Chalabi: amid all the twists and turns of the Kennedys of Iraq, this is a book of immense bitterness. It is hard to be Ahmad Chalabi's daughter, and a loving one at that. There is in any interlocutor's eye that suspicious look on the man who got America into Iraq, amid the intrigues across the region and the persistent, massive bloodshed. I have known Ahmad Chalabi for over 20 years, even shared a few moments in prison in Iran with him. And though I have had profound differences with him, and occasional tantrums, he is a wonderful, larger-than-life, honest man.

Tamara's book does not fill the gap, maybe she simply couldn't. Ahmad is not the subject of "Late for Tea," and I admire her for looking beyond him, to Bibi, Hadi, the aunts and cousins. I am particularly moved by her choice of hero, her uncle Hasan, whom I have also known well, and who draws immense respect in Iraq and the world over. Just ask President Jalal Talabani, whom he refused to dismiss from Baghdad Law School when he taught him there in the mid-1950s, or his students and staff at the Islamic University he presides over at the age of 90, a blind man, author of over twenty books. Tamara has dedicated her book to him. She chose well, and he can be proud of her for this sensible, sensitive, learned work.

Tamara Chalabi's "Late for Tea at the Deer Palace: The Lost Dreams of my Iraqi Family," has just been published by Harper's Press. Chibli Mallat is The Daily Star law editor.

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