

## **Paper Puppet Testimony**

**By**

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The Kurdish uprising of 1991 against venomous dictator Saddam Hussein continues to be an important historical event for all Kurdish people. It was the day that marked the defeat of the Ba'ath regime in Kurdistan's cities. Each year, video footage from that particular moment when people broke into the notorious prison in Sulaymaniyah is shown in commemoration programmes on Kurdish TV channels. The Red Prison (or Security Prison) was a dreadful building in the middle of the city. It stood out as a symbol of terror and oppression, for many years; hundreds of Kurdish men and women were tortured and killed there, by the dictator.

The video footage is part of an old archive taken by a former Peshmerga fighter and filmmaker Abbas Abdulrazaq. He was in the ranks of the Peshmerga forces from the 1980s onwards. He was one of the five photographers who took photos of the Halabja chemical bombardment by Saddam' regime.

While his video footage is used from the archive to show the brutalities committed by the former regime, Abdulrazaq's son Sherko, an artist and scholar, noticed something was missing. He has a vague memory from the day of the uprising in front of the Red Prison. He remembers seeing a caravan full of colourful women's clothes, anti-pregnancy tablets, and other materials. Sherko's memory stayed with him through the years. At the time, he was almost 11 years old when he saw the caravan.

This left its mark on him, and years later he decided to probe further into this story. Since 2008, Sherko has been searching for clues to help him get to the bottom of this mystery. The caravan could be seen for only a few days during the uprising in the courtyard of the prison. It has disappeared without a trace, however; hardly a memory of it remains.

The Red Prison has now been turned into a museum, and its torture chambers and tools, along with prisoners' writings on the walls, have been preserved so that subsequent generations could see the brutality of Saddam's fascist regime. However, the parties behind this transformation were biased and only focused on the memories of those political prisoners who belonged to their own parties.

They erased the entire history of female prisoners. The plight of those women and the mystery of the caravan were ignored and were neither included in the memory of the building nor on TV

programmes because these women might have been raped, and the political establishment does not seem to be willing to confront that history.

This issue has become a concern for Sherko, and he raises many important questions as to why rape of political prisoners should be treated with shame. Why are their sacrifices belittled and erased?

The name of his documentary is “Paper Puppet Testimony,” which recounts the stories of Kurdish women in the Red Prison through experimental documentary.

In his documentary, Sherko tries to bring their stories back into the realm of politics, art, and culture. He is interested in stories that are easily forgotten, and he wants to give them a platform to be narrated and incorporated into official memory.