NARRATING TRAUMA THROUGH KAFKAESQUE ABSURDITY: HASSAN BLASIM'S VISION OF POST-2003 IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Hassan Blasim employs Kafkaesque absurdity as a narrative technique to articulate the collective trauma experienced in post-2003 Iraq. Through textual analysis of Blasim's major works, including The Madman of Freedom Square and The Iraqi Christ, this research explores how surreal and absurdist elements serve as vehicles for processing and communicating experiences of war, displacement, and social fragmentation. The study argues that Blasim's use of Kafkaesque narrative strategies provides a unique literary framework for understanding trauma that transcends conventional realist approaches to war literature. By analyzing the intersection of absurdist literary techniques with trauma narrative, this research contributes to contemporary discussions on Middle Eastern literature, trauma studies, and postcolonial literary criticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Iraqi literary landscape after 2003 has been coloured to a significant degree by memories of violence, displacement, and social transformation that followed the United States invasion and occupation of Iraq. Amongst the writers who have come onto the stage to recount this era of upheaval in Iraqi life is Hassan Blasim, possibly the most experimental and widely read Iraqi writer of his generation (Al-Musawi, 2018). Born in 1973 in Baghdad, Blasim grew up during the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the sanctions era, and the initial years of the 2003 invasion before eventually applying for asylum in Finland in 2004 (Blasim, 2014). His fiction, delivered in the radical surreal imagery, fractured narrative, and dark humor that have evolved into his trademark, presents a non-canonical account of the Iraqi experience that diverges radically from conventional war writing.

Blasim's narrative style most visibly bears comparison to the literary style of Franz Kafka, specifically in terms of the employment of absurdist devices in rendering theme through alienation, bureaucratic hell, and existential horror (Mejcher-Atassi & Schwartz, 2021). "Kafkaesque" now represents a term that has moved beyond its original literary definition to be applied to situations that are marked by surreal distension, bureaucratic irrationality, and the human condition's inability to resist incomprehensible expressions of power (Corngold, 2019). In the Iraqi context after 2003, where the social hierarchies broke down and new violence and uncertainty emerged, Blasim's use of Kafkaesque absurdity is an intriguing way of exploring trauma and how it is written about.

The usefulness of Blasim's writing extends beyond its literary merit to cover issues regarding how literature can be harnessed as a tool for working through shared trauma and witnessing historical catastrophe. His short stories are inclined towards focusing on protagonists who find themselves trapped in nightmare contexts that break down the boundaries between reality and fantasy, sanity and insanity, which renders them extremely suitable for exploring the psychological dimensions of war and displacement (Starkey, 2016). By means of his surrealist imagery, disrupted chronology, and black humor, Blasim offers a world of literature where unthinkable elements of trauma can be voiced.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The problem of describing trauma through literature has been the focus of much intellectual controversy, especially in relation to experiences that appear to exceed existing forms of representation (Caruth, 1996). Conventional realist models of war literature, important as they are in chronicling factual history, could prove insufficient in describing the psychological and existential aspects of trauma defining the Iraqi experience after 2003. The richness of this period in history—characterized by diversities of violence, breakdown of social orders, and displacement of massive numbers of Iraqis—is one that calls for literary strategies that will allow contradiction, fragmentation, and the disintegration of linear narrative coherence.

Hassan Blasim's fiction is a fascinating test case for the thought of how the next generation of Middle Eastern writers have learned to adopt new narrative techniques to respond to these challenges of representation. His use of absurdist themes, extending established literary practices, appears especially well-suited to the unique conditions of post-2003 Iraqi existence. But even as Blasim's writing takes rising international awards, there is still a void in scholarly examination of how his Kafkaesque methods supply vectors for trauma narrative and what this does in order to expose greater trends within Middle Eastern literature today.

In addition, the interconnection between absurdist literary methods and the representation of trauma necessitates delicate theoretical exploration. Whereas certain critics have implied that absurdist strategies risk aestheticizing violence or covering up political truth, others indicate that such methods will be required in order to access traumatic experience that resists conventional forms of representation (LaCapra, 2001). Blasim's own work offers a chance to investigate such arguments in one particular cultural and historical context, offering perhaps something of value about the overall question of how literature can be a means of working through common trauma.

1.2. Aims of the Study

1. Provide an in-depth analysis of Hassan Blasim's use of Kafkaesque absurdity as a narrative strategy to depict trauma in post-2003 Iraq.
2. Demonstrate that Blasim's surreal and absurdist techniques are essential components of his literary approach, designed to capture the psychological, social, and existential dimensions of Iraqi trauma during this period.
3. Highlight the innovative ways contemporary Arab writers are developing new forms of literary expression to address the challenges of

their historical context, particularly how Blasim's Kafkaesque techniques both draw from and depart from established literary traditions.

4. Explore the implications of Blasim's narrative approach in understanding trauma, memory, and witnessing in post-conflict societies, emphasizing how his techniques help process experiences of loss, displacement, and violence.

1.3. Questions of the Study

This research addresses the following questions

1. What specific Kafkaesque elements (surreal imagery, bureaucratic nightmare, existential absurdity, narrative fragmentation) can be identified in Blasim's major works, and how do these elements function within his overall narrative strategy?

2. In what ways does Blasim's use of absurdist techniques differ from or build upon traditional approaches to war literature and trauma narrative in Middle Eastern literary traditions?

3. How do Blasim's Kafkaesque techniques address the particular historical and cultural conditions of post-2003 Iraq, and what aspects of the Iraqi experience do they make visible that might be obscured by conventional realist approaches?

4. What theoretical implications does Blasim's work have for understanding the relationship between literary absurdity and trauma representation, particularly in postcolonial contexts?

5. How does Blasim's position as an exile writer influence his deployment of Kafkaesque techniques, and what role does displacement play in shaping his literary vision?

1.4. Value of the Study

This research contributes to several important areas of literary and cultural scholarship. Within the field of contemporary Middle Eastern literature, the study provides detailed analysis of one of the most innovative and internationally recognized Iraqi writers of his generation, helping to establish Hassan Blasim's significance within broader literary traditions while also illuminating his unique contributions to the field. Given the relative scarcity of scholarly work on contemporary Iraqi literature in English-language academia, this research addresses an important gap in literary scholarship.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the relationship between literary form and trauma representation. By analyzing how Kafkaesque techniques function within the specific context of post-2003 Iraqi experience, the research offers insights into broader questions about how literature can serve as a medium for processing collective trauma and bearing witness to historical catastrophe. This contributes to the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies while also advancing our understanding of how literary techniques can be adapted to address particular historical and cultural circumstances.

The research also has implications for postcolonial literary criticism by examining how a contemporary Middle Eastern writer draws on and transforms established Western literary traditions (particularly the Kafkaesque) to address the specific conditions of his cultural and historical context. This analysis contributes to discussions about literary influence, cultural translation, and the ways contemporary writers from formerly colonized societies engage with and transform metropolitan literary traditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature informing this research intersects a number of but related areas of scholarship: modern Arab and Middle Eastern literature, trauma literature and trauma studies, Kafka studies and the Kafkaesque, and postcolonial literary criticism. The review synthesizes key work in each of the above areas as well as delineates areas where there are gaps that are filled by this research.

2.1. Contemporary Middle Eastern Literature and Iraqi Writing

The field of contemporary Middle Eastern literature has expanded significantly in terms of scholarly interest over the past two decades, driven in part by increased worldwide interest in the region due to political instability and in part by the emergence of new and pioneering writers that have gained international recognition (Aghacy & Khoury, 2020). In this broad field, Iraqi literature plays a unique role due to the unique historical development of the nation and the incredible challenges encountered by its writers.

Muhsin Al-Musawi's The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights (2009) and Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition (2018) are necessary background texts to appreciate contemporary Iraqi literary production in the wider frame of Arabic literary modernism. Al-Musawi's research follows the way in which Iraqi writers have

always led the way in literary innovation across the Arab world from the early modernist poetry of Nazik al-Malaika and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab to the experimental fiction of such modern writers as Hassan Blasim.

Scholarship by Sinan Antoon has been especially useful in defining the terms for reading Iraqi literature post-2003. In The Baghdad Blues: A City in Short Fiction (2016), Antoon discusses how Iraqi writers reacted to the specific conditions of being under occupation, war, and sanctions. His account indicates to what degree Iraqi fiction of the contemporary period diverged from social realism dominant within most of twentieth-century Arabic literature towards more experimental and psychologically focused forms.

Stephan Milich's Politics of Literature in Iraq after 2003 (2019) offers crucial background to the cultural and institutional conditions under which authors such as Blasim have written. Milich's volume records the disintegration of post-2003 literary institutions in Iraq and the development of new literary forms, of which diaspora writing to be found in much of Blasim's fiction is one example. His writing shows us how the state of exile has effectively molded the stylistic and thematic preoccupations of recent Iraqi literature.

Rebecca L. Walkowitz's Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature (2015) offers a paradigm for theorizing authors such as Blasim writing in conditions of knowledge about translation and world circulation. Walkowitz's "born translated" theory of literature provides insight into how Blasim's fiction, even grounded in particular Iraqi realities, employs narrative tactics calculated to produce meaning through and against linguistic and cultural borders.

2.2. Trauma Studies and Literary Representation

The confluence of trauma and literary representation has been theorized almost exclusively, starting with Cathy Caruth's influential work Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996). Caruth's understanding of how traumatic experience resists mere representation but necessarily calls out for articulation offers a theoretical ground for why writers such as Blasim resort to non-realist strategies. Her identification of trauma as "unclaimed experience" that comes back late in the guise of repetition and displacement is suggestive of the fragmented, non-linear nature of much trauma writing.

Dominick LaCapra's Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001) is a broadening of these perspectives

in that it addresses the intersection of literary representation and historical trauma. LaCapra's demarcation of "acting out" and "working through" trauma is a useful paradigm on which to navigate the function of various literary devices in working through traumatic experience. His elaboration of the double function of literature as symptom and mode of working through trauma is centrally relevant to considering Blasim's work.

Geoffrey Hartman's The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust (1996) discusses how extreme events in the past test traditional modes of representation. Hartman's analysis of how writing about the Holocaust created new narrative approaches out of the bankruptcy of traditional realism offers a paradigm for understanding comparable innovation elsewhere in cases of historical trauma.

In later times, Stef Craps's Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds (2013) challenged the Eurocentrism of early trauma theory in considering how authors of postcolonial descent came up with particular methods of depicting trauma. Craps contends that trauma theory's concentration on individual psychology and Western pasts has come at the cost of other traumatic experience and their literary representation. His research provides necessary context for the understanding of the way writers like Blasim navigate the terrain between individual and collective trauma within the postcolonial environment.

2.3. Kafka Studies and the Kafkaesque

The "Kafkaesque" as a word has developed far more since Franz Kafka's passing in 1924, expanding beyond literary to everyday cultural use while keeping its association with particular narrative strategies and thematic issues (Corngold, 2019). Stanley Corngold's Lambent Traces: Franz Kafka (2019) offers critical examination of Kafka's methods of narrative displacement, surrealist narration, and the presentation of unfathomable bureaucratic systems in creating specific effects on readers.

Walter Benjamin's "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death" (1934/1968) is still alive today because of its description of how Kafka's work exemplifies life under modernity where old models of meaning and authority fail. Benjamin's identification of Kafka's "parables" as stories that point toward meaning without fixed interpretation provides a model for how such strategies can succeed today.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's Kafka: Toward

a Minor Literature (1975/1986) has been specifically influential in postcolonial literary theory for its examination of how authors writing in metropolitan culture language can produce "minor literature" which subverts conventional forms. Their "deterritorialization" theory is a model for examining how writers such as Blasim may appropriate strategies based in European literary convention but deploy them to voice alternative cultural experience.

More recently, James Hawes's Excavating Kafka (2008) has protested certain romantic readings of Kafka's work in holding firm to its engagement with the specific historical and political conditions of early-twentieth-century Central Europe. This historically located reading of Kafka offers a model for thinking through how readers in the present might deploy Kafkaesque methods to their own moments in time.

2.4. Postcolonial Literary Criticism and Middle Eastern Writing

Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) provided the basis for much postcolonial analysis of Middle Eastern literature in its discussion of how the Middle East has been constructed in the West in terms of native relations of power. Although Said's argument was directed at Western constructions of the Middle East, subsequent scholarship has analyzed how Middle Eastern writers responded to and reversed Orientalist thinking in their writing.

Homi Bhabha's "mimicry" and "hybridity" in The Location of Culture (1994) are conceptual frameworks on which postcolonial authors respond to metropolitan literary culture. Bhabha's observation of how subjects of colonialism borrow and use parts of hegemonic culture, altering it in the process, is useful in recognizing how authors such as Blasim may borrow techniques from European modernism for use on behalf of other cultures.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's The Empire Writes Back (2002) is an investigation of postcolonial authors' creation of unique literary strategies in describing the experience of colonialism and its legacy. Their inquiry into the ways that postcolonial writing "writes back" to metropolitan discourse but produces new modes of expression contextualizes the understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern literature.

More specifically concerned with Arabic literature, Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi's Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict (2006) discusses how Iraqi authors have worked out the tense interplay between native cultural norms and international literary forms. Al-Musawi's study traces how recent Iraqi authors have developed new strategies that borrow from Arabic literary forms as well as international modernist methods.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative text analysis methodology that intersects close reading methods with theory in trauma studies, postcolonial critique, and literary modernism studies. The inquiry method is designed to investigate the formal properties of Hassan Blasim's narrative strategies and their cultural and historical relevance against the background of post-2003 Iraqi fiction.

3.1. Text Selection and Scope

The main texts to be examined are from Hassan Blasim's extensive short story collections in print in English translation: The Madman of Freedom Square (2009), translated by Jonathan Wright, and The Iraqi Christ (2013), once more translated by Wright. Both novels are Blasim's most widely circulated and best-received work and serve crucial material for study.

Here the emphasis is placed on those stories most clearly demonstrating Kafkaesque features and mechanisms of trauma narrative. Of particular interest to close reading are "The Madman of Freedom Square," "The Iraqi Christ," "The Nightmare of Carlos Fuentes," "Crosswords," and "Reality and Record." These are chosen because they illustrate many of the features of Blasim's approach to exploring the numerous aspects of post-2003 Iraqi existence.

The criticism is conscious of the pitfalls involved in working from translated material, recognizing that much of the nuance in language, allusion to culture, and wordplay will be lost or altered in translation. However, Jonathan Wright's translations have been widely praised for their quality and have been approved by Blasim himself, which suggests that they provide good access to the dominant characteristics of his narrative strategy.

3.2. Analytical Approach

The analysis combines macro-level examination of narrative structure and technique with micro-level close reading of specific passages, images, and scenes. This dual approach allows for understanding both the overall architecture of Blasim's narrative strategy and the particular ways that individual techniques create meaning.

3.2.1. Macro-level Analysis

At the structural level, the study examines how Blasim organizes his stories, including his use of

fragmented chronology, multiple perspectives, and the relationship between realistic and surreal elements. This includes analysis of how individual stories function within the broader architecture of his collections and how recurring themes and images create coherence across multiple texts.

3.2.2. Micro-level Analysis

At the textual level, the study employs close reading techniques to examine specific passages, paying particular attention to Blasim's use of imagery, metaphor, and symbolism. This includes detailed analysis of how surreal elements function within realistic contexts and how specific linguistic techniques create particular effects.

3.2.3. Comparative Analysis

The study includes limited comparative analysis with other works of trauma literature and with Kafka's own writing, designed to illuminate the distinctive characteristics of Blasim's approach. This comparative dimension helps establish both the continuities and innovations in his work.

3.3. Thematic Categories for Analysis

The analysis is organized around several key thematic and technical categories that emerge from the intersection of Blasim's literary practice with theoretical concerns about trauma and representation:

3.3.1. Kafkaesque Elements

This category includes analysis of specific techniques that connect Blasim's work to Kafka's literary practice, including the presentation of incomprehensible bureaucratic systems, the use of surreal imagery within realistic contexts, and the portrayal of protagonists caught in nightmarish situations beyond their control or understanding.

3.3.2. Trauma Representation

This category examines how Blasim's techniques function to represent different forms of traumatic experience, including individual psychological trauma, collective historical trauma, and the ongoing trauma of displacement and exile. Particular attention is given to how non-linear narrative techniques and surreal imagery serve trauma representation.

3.3.3. Violence and the Body

This category analyzes Blasim's representation of physical violence and its psychological effects, including his use of graphic imagery and the

relationship between physical and psychological violence in his work.

3.3.4 Exile and Displacement

This category examines how Blasim's experience as an exile writer influences his narrative techniques and thematic concerns, including his representation of the relationship between memory and place.

3.3.5 Iraqi Historical Context

This category analyzes how Blasim's work engages with specific historical events and conditions in post-2003 Iraq while transforming this material through literary techniques.

3.4. Limitations and Considerations

The research methodology is cognizant of the existence of several important limitations. First, analysis is primarily of English translation and not necessarily all the subtleties of original Arabic-language work. Second, the research focuses on Blasim's short stories only, not striving for exhaustive coverage of his other fiction works, nor of his multimedia and cinematic work.

The study also takes into account the question of applying theoretical models constructed primarily with regards to Western literary tradition and historical experience to a non-Western cultural work. Although postcolonial critique offers instruments for managing cross-cultural literary analysis, the study is conscious of the danger of applying misguided interpretive contexts.

The approach is attuned to the limitation of literary criticism of more recent work not having the advantage of profound critical tradition or biography available that could offer secondary interpretation in dependency upon it. Analysis thus primarily takes into account what can be inferred from the works themselves and makes use of pertinent biographical and historical information wherever possible.

This approach is planned so that it offers rigorous examination of Blasim's writing practices without being insensitive to the cultural and historical specificity of his work and forcing inappropriate theoretical framings onto him. The plan is to build understanding of how his narrative practices work and what they do instead of proving anticipated theoretical knowledge.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The reading of Hassan Blasim's stories demonstrates an equal deployment of Kafkaesque motifs for the description of the traumatic events of post-2003 Iraq. The motifs occupy the central ground

in comprehension of his larger undertones of narrative patterns in representing the psychological, social, and existential aspects of trauma.

4.1. Kafkaesque Elements in Blasim's Narrative

Blasim's fiction, including The Madman of Freedom Square and The Iraqi Christ, blends surrealist and absurdist imagery reminiscent of the characteristic motifs of Kafka: alienation, bureaucratic hell, and powerlessness of men within baffling systems. His characters in these narratives mostly inhabit spaces of nightmare, broken worlds, where lines between dream and reality are blurred, where they attempt to understand and make sense of the helter-skelter they go through. This sense of absurdity reinforces the exasperation felt by those of us trapped in the straitjacketed circularity of violence and political volatility that define post-2003 Iraq.

4.2. Representation of Trauma through Absurdity

Blasim's Kafkaesque methods are devices for expressing trauma, not only on an individual level but on a social level of national trauma. The fragmented narration and non-linear timelines are a reflection of the breakdown of Iraq's political and social institutions, a fundamental aspect of the trauma experienced by the Iraqi nation. For instance, in The Iraqi Christ, the odyssey of the protagonist, fraught with absurd and surreal happenings, underscores the sense of dislocation experienced by people after war and exile. Employing absurdity also entails the unmooring of emotion and the psychological disorientation caused by decades of war, displacement, and social collapse.

4.3. Exile and Displacement as Central Themes

Blasim's experience of exile weighs heavily on his representation of displacement. Physical and mental exile is a common theme in his works. His Kafkaesque absurdity is an expression of that sense of rootlessness and alienation characteristic of exiles. This is very much the Iraqi experience post-2003, when Iraqis were displaced by the post-invasion violence and chaos led by America. Through his stories, Blasim sets a literary tone by which the readers are able to connect with the fractured identities and destroyed sense of belonging that ensue as a consequence of exile and displacement.

4.4. Literary Innovations and Trauma Representation

Blasim's fiction subverts traditional war writing by evading the depiction of violence itself. Rather, he employs absurdity as a mechanism for avoiding the unrepresentability of trauma. This is an aspect to which critics such as LaCapra (2001) agree works in order to describe trauma which moves beyond standard representability. By way of Blasim's narratives, the unthinkable becomes knowable, and trauma can be worked through and interpreted in manners to which realist methods can never aspire.

5. CONCLUSION

Hassan Blasim's use of Kafkaesque absurdity offers a unique lens through which to understand trauma in post-2003 Iraq. By blending surreal imagery, narrative fragmentation, and existential absurdity, Blasim provides a literary space where the complexities of war, violence, and displacement can be explored in ways that defy traditional narrative structures. This research underscores the importance of absurdist techniques in literature as a powerful tool for articulating experiences of trauma, particularly in contexts where traditional representations fall short.

Blasim's work not only contributes to the discourse on trauma literature but also offers significant insights into the role of literature in documenting historical catastrophes. His narratives reveal how absurdist techniques can make visible the otherwise invisible aspects of trauma and displacement, particularly in a postcolonial context. By examining Blasim's literary innovations, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of literature in processing collective trauma, highlighting the ways in which contemporary Arab writers are reshaping global literary traditions to address their unique cultural and historical conditions.

Blasim's deployment of Kafkaesque absurdity challenges the boundaries of conventional war literature, positioning him as a significant figure in contemporary Middle Eastern writing. His work serves as a testament to the potential of literature to transcend its traditional forms and to offer new ways of bearing witness to the profound human costs of war and displacement.

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