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Arabic Terror Fiction in Iraq and Egypt: Trauma, Taboos, Dystopia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Comparative Literature

by

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June 2021

The dissertation of Ghassan Aburqayeq is approved.

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June 2021

Arabic Terror Fiction in Iraq and Egypt: Trauma, Dystopia, and Taboos

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by

Ghassan Aburqayeq

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## ABSTRACT

Arabic Terror Fiction in Iraq and Egypt: Trauma, Taboos, Dystopia

by

Ghassan Aburqayeq

This dissertation examines a literary mode of terror that has recently flourished in Iraqi and Egyptian fiction, addressing the trauma of war and revolution. This literary mode is best represented by a group of emerging writers who witnessed dramatic changes in their home countries after the Iraq War (2003-2011) and the Egyptian revolution of 2011. These events shocked people to the core and left indelible traumatic memories that have shaped their socio-political consciousness. Arabic fiction recorded these changes by developing a new mode of writing that sought to reflect the intense terror and fear experienced by the general population. This new mode dramatizes traumatic circumstances and induces feelings of fright and repulsion, relying on tragic stories, supernatural elements, dark allegories, and apocalyptic themes. This mode has introduced new paradigms of trauma that not only depict past memories but also anticipate impending trauma that threatens to devastate the future of individuals as well as nations. These writers also focus on topics that have been taboos in the Arab World, including graphic descriptions of sex, open discussions of politics, and criticism of religion. Consulting trauma theory, I argue that placing this mode within a context of trauma helps us understand this dramatic change in contemporary Arabic fiction.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

I have used English translations for the works in question. In the absence of known English translations, I have used my own translations and indicated that either in the body of the text or in the footnotes. I have chosen to follow the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) for the transliteration of names, terminology, and quotations from the Arabic language.

## INTRODUCTION

Kamāl Midḥat wrote to Farīda: ‘At times of war, animal instincts are always on the rise. Sex becomes the antonym of death, and not of love ... Such is war. It means the sheer insanity of extremists, fools and hysterics. It means people suffering from hallucinations, paranoia, walking dreams and bouts of depression, despair and crying. It is a hunger for blood and thirst for filth’ (Badr 278).

The signs of trauma that ‘Alī Badr’s *The Tobacco Keeper* (2008) describes in this quote epitomize a new mode of writing in contemporary Arabic fiction. This literary mode is best represented by a group of emerging writers who witnessed dramatic changes in their home countries after the Iraq War (2003-2011) and the Egyptian revolution of 2011. These events shocked people to the core and left indelible traumatic memories that have shaped their socio-political consciousness. Arabic fiction in Iraq and Egypt recorded these changes by developing a new mode of writing that sought to reflect the intense terror and fear experienced by the general population. This new mode dramatizes traumatic circumstances and induces feelings of fright and repulsion, relying on tragic stories, supernatural elements, dark allegories, and apocalyptic themes. This mode has introduced new paradigms of trauma that not only depict past memories but also anticipate impending trauma that threatens to devastate the future of individuals as well as nations. These writers also focus on topics that have been taboos in the Arab World, including graphic descriptions of sex, open discussions of politics, and criticism of religion.

Since it depicts an ongoing fear, anticipates a future danger, and creates a frightening atmosphere that combines elements of intense apprehension, confusion, mental anguish, and dread, I call this emerging form of literary writing “terror fiction.” It is grounded in contemporary collective and personal experiences of political terror that was accompanied by a series of socio-economic crises. This dissertation discusses three aspects of novels and

short stories that exemplify this mode. First, it examines the use of national allegory in terror fiction to deliver broader messages about collective trauma experienced by entire cities or nations. Second, it discusses how authors use obscene language and address taboo topics to challenge traditional Arabic literary conventions. Third, the dissertation sheds light on dystopia as one of the major themes that have recently emerged in Arabic fiction, due to the collapse of hope for a better future. While exploring contemporary terror fiction in Iraq and Egypt, I further address questions related to the field of trauma theory and literature. I examine how cataclysmic events such as the Iraq War and the Egyptian revolution of 2011 left unforgettable and haunting memories that have shaped the works of this new generation of writers.

In addition to that, I examine how a young generation of Arab writers turned the socio-political and economic crises into an opportunity to develop new styles and themes in Arabic fiction. Although it has borrowed some images, themes, techniques, and forms from Western literature such as grotesque images and the dystopia theme, Arabic terror fiction goes beyond Western uses by turning them into very sophisticated means describing an ongoing trauma widely viewed as a result of Western political and military interventions in the Arab World. Beside borrowing Western forms and incorporating them into their works, many Arab writers rely on their personal experiences as victims of trauma and their theoretical and practical expertise in the field of psychology, a first-hand knowledge that may give their fictional work more credibility. Ḥasan Balāsīm (1973-), who came to Europe as a refugee, and Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1976-), who is a psychiatrist, are among the well-known writers of this literary mode who have fictionalized their personal knowledge of trauma. Examining this literature through the lens of trauma theory, I argue that placing this terror

mode within a context of trauma helps us understand this dramatic change in contemporary Arabic fiction.

The connection between the collective socio-political situation and literary production is instrumental in understanding this new mode of Iraqi and Egyptian fiction. A few critical works have addressed the influence of trauma on Arabic fiction, but hardly any have addressed this mode of writing in terms of trauma theory.<sup>1</sup> I analyze how these authors' devastating personal experiences and their commitment to the national collective struggle are represented in their works. For instance, the recurrent representation of the future as a source of despair and shock rather than hope, and the explicit treatment of formerly taboo topics such as sectarian violence in Iraq and prostitution in Egypt are all reflected in this contemporary fiction. Examining these works from a comparative perspective can help the reader see patterns and common threads tied to the chaos that the two countries have experienced. It also serves as an attempt to "decolonize" and extend the analysis of trauma theory by shifting emphasis from the Western dominant histories to more recent and understudied non-Western histories.

In order to better understand contemporary terror fiction in Iraq and Egypt, I employ methods of trauma analysis, building on and extending earlier efforts in the work of Cathy Caruth, Jeffrey Alexander, and Stef Craps, among others. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth identifies trauma as a response to an overwhelming event that sometimes appears belatedly, causing the individual to hold on to the moment of that experience and appearing compulsively over and over again in different forms such as repeated nightmares

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<sup>1</sup> See Mostafa's "Literary Representations of Trauma" (2009); Gana's "Trauma Ties" (2013); al-Sammān's *Anxiety of Erasure* (2015); and Milich and Moghnieh's "Trauma: Social Realities and Cultural Texts" (2018).



and hallucinations (4). Trauma theory is chiefly based on Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the concepts of repetition compulsion and traumatic neurosis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud explains how individuals become fixated on their traumatic memories, which continue to revisit them in their dreams: “Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up into the situation of his accident ... the patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma” (7). In the early 1990s, trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Dominick LaCapra contributed significantly to the rise of trauma theory by publishing foundational texts that went beyond the post-Vietnam and Holocaust studies. These scholars introduced an event-based model of trauma that emphasizes the belated understanding of the events and focuses mainly on examples from the West.

More recently, a group of post-colonial critics have responded to the relative lack of reference to wars and other collective tragedies that have happened in the Global South. Gert Buelens, Stef Craps, Irene Visser, and others initiated a project to incorporate the critical tools of trauma theory into postcolonial literary studies. Postcolonial critics frequently accuse the dominant model of trauma theory of being Eurocentric, having de-historicizing and depoliticizing tendencies, and relying on deconstructionist techniques and psychoanalytic tools that they think limit the representations of the traumatic experience. A few scholars such as Shoshana Felman responded to the postcolonial critics, viewing their criticism as sweeping accusations that reflect a misunderstanding of trauma theory. With an awareness of the ongoing controversy regarding these critical stances, this dissertation builds on the major theoretical works in trauma theory and postcolonial criticism. Both models offer critical

insights for thinking about this literary mode, which is grounded in contemporary political terror.

The terror mode that shaped most of recent Iraqi fiction is the product of long decades of war, totalitarianism, and foreign economic sanctions. Although Iraq was one of the earliest Middle Eastern countries to gain independence, the postcolonial era has been very bloody, witnessing several wars, military coups, revolutions, and sectarian clashes. Because of the successive waves of violence in Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi military personnel and civilians have been killed, imprisoned, tortured, or displaced from their homeland. While the number of physical casualties from these conflicts was very large, even more Iraqi civilians were psychologically wounded and have lived the rest of their lives in constant fear and trauma. Widely viewed as the most disastrous years in the modern history of the country, the Iraq War (2003-2011) was a catalyst that gave rise to a new mode of Iraqi fiction, as mentioned above. In this mode, writers try carefully to depict such reactions of their traumatized characters as social isolation, emotional numbness, obsession with death, and anxiety disorder. They also use the stories of their individual fictional figures to refer allegorically to the collective trauma that has torn the fabric of the Iraqi psyche. In this dissertation, I examine several Iraqi works to show how such a collective trauma shapes this mode of terror.

The first work that I explore is *Ḥāris al-Tabgh (The Tobacco Keeper)* (2008) by ‘Alī Badr (1964-), a novel that deals allegorically with the cultural trauma of modern Iraq. Relying on a frame-tale technique, the unnamed narrator tells his story as an Iraqi ghost writer who is asked to write the biography of a famous composer, Kamāl Midḥat, whose body “was found near the Jumhuriya Bridge that crosses the River Tigris in Baghdad” on 3

April 2006 (Badr 3). With three different names and identities that incorporate three phases in the modern history of Iraq, Kamāl Midḥat appears as a complex character who represents the multi-ethnic, religious, and political affiliations of the Iraqi people. Embodying the trauma of the Jewish people, Shiites, and Sunnis in Baghdad, Kamāl is an allegorical figure who reappears in multiple identities in periods of struggle that perhaps fragmented the sense of social unity in Iraq. In a similar mode, Dunā Ghālī (1963-), an exiled writer and psychiatrist, addresses sectarian violence in Iraq from a feminist perspective. In *Manāzil al-waḥshah (Houses of Loneliness)* (2013), Ghālī tells the tragedy of a Baghdadi family forced to live horrible years during the American occupation of Iraq. Due to the increasing violence in the city, the family members confine themselves in their house and live years of fear and loneliness. Apart from the violence in the streets, the mother narrates the tragedies of her son, who is psychologically ill, and her husband, who lives abroad. Trying to hold her family together, the mother realizes that the horror that Baghdad experiences has turned it into a city of loneliness.

In a more pessimistic tone, the short story collection, *Ma'riḍ al-Juthath (The Corpse Exhibition: And Other Stories of Iraq)* (2014), by Ḥasan Balāsīm (1973-) blends elements of realism and fantasy to produce a very shocking image of post-war Iraq. The world that Balāsīm's stories describe is replete with horrific scenes of crimes that are often driven by religious motives. While the work shows that the American forces were primarily responsible for the tragedy in Iraq, local fundamentalists, sectarian militias, as well as the corrupt government are also complicit. The work breaks several taboos by talking openly and excessively about religion, politics, and sex. In a similar vein, *al-'Irāq+100 (Iraq + 100)* (2017), an anthology of ten short stories edited by Ḥasan Balāsīm, captures the socio-

economic consequences of the wars on Iraqi civilians one century after the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Among the stories in this collection, “‘Amaliyyat Daniel” (“Operation Daniel”) by Khālid Kāki (1971-) uses classic Western techniques of dystopia to describe the loss of Iraqi identity under a future Chinese occupation of the city of Kirkuk. Similarly, Aḥmad Sa‘dāwī (1973-) writes *Frānkishtāyin fī Baghdād (Frankenstein in Baghdad)* (2014), the first Iraqi novel to win the international prize for Arabic fiction (IPAF), which it did in 2014. Relying on comic and magical realism elements, the novel captures the horror of living in Baghdad during the US occupation. It introduces a superhero, whose body is composed of body parts left in the streets after the explosions in Baghdad. This monstrous hero first kills only guilty people, but later murders everyone in his path, presenting a grotesque image of life in modern Iraq.

Similar to Iraq, Egyptians have been experiencing increasingly difficult conditions from the mid-twentieth century to the present. In 1958, the Egyptian government declared emergency law and enacted military rule but has rarely lifted them even during times of peace. These regulations have allowed the government to imprison any individual without trial for any period even if there is no obvious reason for the detainment. The law has also extended the power of the police, enforced censorship, and suspended many constitutional rights. In many cases, this law has deprived Egyptian civilians of such basic rights as the freedom to demonstrate, to publish certain books, criticize politicians, or sometimes even travelling. Consequently, on January 25, 2011, millions of Egyptians started massive protests, demanding the overthrow of the president and an end to the economic and political corruption. The protestors succeeded in overthrowing the president and organizing new democratic elections, but the former political elite reproduced itself again, creating a new

totalitarian regime. The failed revolution found an echo among writers who started to write dystopian works that reflect bitter disappointment in the status quo.

Unlike the Iraqi narratives that mostly focus on the trauma of the past and fear in the present, Egyptian fiction depicts a very dark future for the country.<sup>2</sup> *‘Uṭārid* (2013) by Muḥammad Rabī‘ (1978-) is one of the most disturbing novels in the history of Egyptian literature. The title “*‘Uṭārid*” is the Arabic name for the planet Mercury and the last name of the main character in the novel, Aḥmad ‘Uṭārid, who is a Cairene police officer joining a resistance movement that seeks to liberate Egypt. Setting the events in the future, specifically the year 2025, Rabī‘ portrays a gloomy future for Cairo where it is occupied by an alien army. Shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2016, *‘Uṭārid* captures the trauma of the Egyptian civilians who await a nightmarish fate where death and violence surround them. The novel contains many brutal scenes of murder, rape, and violence, and the events do not follow a chronological order but range back-and-forth between past and future events. Incorporating the three aspects of Arabic terror fiction that I listed above: cultural trauma, taboos, and dystopia, this novel epitomizes this mode of terror fiction.

*Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (Using Life)* (2014) by Aḥmad Nājī (1985-) is another post-revolution novel that represents the dystopian trend among Egyptian young writers. Dealing explicitly with socio-political taboos, *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* was banned and Nājī was imprisoned because his work was considered a violation of public morals. The novel shows how modern Cairo has become a setting for natural disasters, social taboos, and political conspiracies that all traumatize the citizens. In her novel, *al-Ṭābūr (The Queue)* (2013), the Egyptian journalist and psychiatrist, Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1976-) introduces a dystopian

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-‘Irāq+100 (Iraq + 100)* edited by Ḥasan Balāsīm is one of the few Iraqi works set in the future.

society that lives under a totalitarian regime after a failed uprising. Writing allegorically, the novel deals with themes of torture, censorship, and trauma. It also describes the ways the ruling elite dehumanizes citizens and perpetuates their suffering by means of bureaucracy, surveillance, and propaganda. Although the events take place in an unnamed country, it is widely read as a prediction of the 2011 revolution's failure and the return to military rule in Egypt.

### **Summary of Chapters:**

In the first chapter, I provide a brief history of trauma theory and explain how this methodology may help us understand contemporary Arabic fiction in Iraq and Egypt. I trace the development of the concept of trauma from the late nineteenth century until the 1990s, when it emerged as a salient theory in the work of Cathy Caruth and others. I compare the trauma theory debate and the postcolonial response regarding such issues as the possibility of representing trauma, melancholia, and the function of narrative. I explain how modern Arabic literature may introduce new paradigms of trauma that have been understudied in trauma studies. Apart from giving a brief literature review of the foundational texts in trauma theory, I also discuss the relative lack of such studies in the Arab world.

The second chapter deals with the concept of cultural trauma and its relevance to contemporary Arabic fiction. I argue that the primary texts explored in this project reflect a sense of cultural trauma that deals with entire communities rather than individuals. I consult Jeffrey Alexander's *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), which argues that this social phenomenon affects entire communities and leaves indelible memories that shape their

national consciousness and make them feel that their collective identities are under an existential threat (1). Analyzing *Hāris al-Tabgh*, *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, and *‘Uṭārid*, I discuss how these novels depict trauma in Iraq and Egypt as a social construction that is created not only by the traumatic events themselves but is also shaped by the members of society who view it as a blow to the national identity. Exploring the works in terms of cultural trauma shows the severe damage that has struck the collective consciousness of people in Iraq and Egypt as well the great challenge that citizens face to preserve their social identity.

The third chapter deals with a growing tendency among young Arabic writers to break long-held taboos and speak about the unspeakable. In traditional Iraqi and Egyptian communities and under totalitarian governments, writing openly about sex, or criticizing religion and politicians often leads to controversy. In some cases, works are not published and in many occasions the authors are either legally persecuted or their reputations become subject to systematic defamations. In order to avoid this, writers often write allegorically. However, the current severe situation of victimhood that people live has created a new generation of writers who resist these restrictions, producing works that address the unspeakable and take away its power to silence. For instance, not only do authors excessively describe explicit sexual scenes, but they depict societies full of homosexuality, rape, and prostitution. When it comes to religion, Iraqi and Egyptian writers of terror fiction address such themes as sectarian violence, corruption of religious leaders, and humanization of non-Muslims and dehumanization of Muslim figures. Political leaders are also not immune from criticism, and their totalitarian policies are accused of being responsible for creating traumatized nations that suffer from violence, corruption, totalitarianism, and terror.

Focusing on Balāsīm’s *Ma ‘riḍ al-Juthath*, Nājī’s *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* and other works, this chapter reads the breaking of taboos in Arabic terror fiction as a form of what Judith Herman considers as a “crisis of faith” resulting from trauma.

The fourth chapter deals with dystopia, a trend that has become popular in contemporary fiction in Iraq and Egypt. Dystopian literature was not very common in Arabic literature before the Arab Spring, and only a few works had been written in this genre.<sup>3</sup> The term dystopia is controversial as most scholars have not yet agreed on a specific terminology for it in Arabic. According to Barbara Bakker,

In the Arabic literary research field, experts have yet to agree on the proper Modern Standard Arabic terminology to discuss dystopian narrative. This has resulted in different designations, for example *adab al-madīna al-fāsida* (literature of the corrupted city), as opposed to *adab al-madīna al-faḍila* (literature of the virtuous city), *naqīd al-yūtūbia* (the antithesis of utopia) and *‘ālam al-wāqi‘ al-marīr* (the world of the bitter reality), together with *al-yūtūbia al-ḍid* (the opposite of utopia), *al-mudun al-taḥdhīriyya* (the cities of warning) and – last but not least – the English word transliterated into *distūbia*.

The increasing number of futurist dystopian narratives may reflect severe anxiety about the future in the last two decades, a disturbing situation that may qualify those concerns to be called “Pretraumatic Stress.” The dystopian fictions examined in this chapter tend to depict a world socially collapsed, where there is no place for virtue or goodness. They function as a

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<sup>3</sup> *Al-Ṭufān al-Azraq* (1976) by Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Salām Baqqālī, *Sukkān al-‘Ālam al-Thānī* (1977) by Nihād Sharīf, and *al-Saiyyd min Ḥaql al-Sabānakh* (1987) by Ṣabrī Mūsā are some of the most popular dystopian novels in Arabic literature.



warning of an impending danger or trauma that might occur at any moment. I argue that the collapse of the dream of a better future after the War in Iraq and the Arab Spring gave rise to this dystopian phenomenon in Arabic fiction. Focusing on the themes of apocalypse, dehumanization, and the grotesque, this chapter carries out a detailed analysis of the dystopian aspects of Sa‘dāwī’s *Frānkishtāyin fī Baghdād*, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s *al-Ṭābūr* and gives some examples from Rabī‘’s *Uṭārid*, Nājī’s *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, and Kāki’s “‘Amaliyyat Daniel.’”

Despite its emphasis on Western examples of trauma, the theoretical structure and literary praxis of trauma theory can be used to explain the mode of terror in contemporary Iraqi and Egyptian fiction. While a rapprochement between trauma studies and postcolonial theory can situate trauma theory in a more globalized perspective, the ongoing unrest in the Arab World has been given little attention compared to the possible consequences that they may cause in the future. The sources of terror still exist, and the victims still live in vulnerable situations that endanger their futures lives. This offers a pressing issue on how to make sense of the traumatic experience of a people who still live in areas of wars, violence, or totalitarianism. The questions that arise are: Can the terrorized citizens of Iraq and Egypt overcome their cultural trauma by narrating their traumatic past? Can the explicit discussion of Arab taboos be read as a form of what Judith Herman calls a “crisis of faith”? How do the shocking narratives of a dystopian future introduce a new mode of writing in Arabic fiction? As I ultimately propose, reading a group of Iraqi and Egyptian terror fictions from a trauma theory perspective may shed light onto deeply traumatized societies and the works of writers who wrestle with their own and their fellow citizens’ experiences of atrocities and, in their novels and stories, refuse to relegate those experiences to oblivion.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **THE CONCEPT OF TRAUMA: A BRIEF HISTORY**

The trauma of encountering catastrophic events such as wars, revolutions, terrorism, and natural disasters often evokes a crisis of witnessing that involves a process of remembering the painful past. Although survivors of trauma may leave the horrific scene with no signs of physical or psychological damage, they later suffer the after-effects of their experiences and struggle with intrusive memories that disrupt their daily lives. To explain such painful experiences, trauma theory helps us understand the psychic wound that appears immediately or belatedly. Different fields of psychology, psychiatry, and sociology have dealt with trauma, and their long debates have produced multiple terms such as “railway spine,” “shell-shock,” “trauma neurosis,” “battle fatigue” and “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD). The frequent changes in the vocabulary used to describe trauma and the development of the treatment reflect a growing awareness of the psychological consequences of catastrophic events.

In the 1990s, a group of theorists and scholars, including Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub published several works that moved the theorization of trauma beyond the post-Vietnam and Holocaust studies. They focused on the event-based model of trauma and its belated effects on the victims. In the last ten years, multiple postcolonial critics, including Irene Visser, Michael Rothberg, and Stef Craps tried to create a rapprochement between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies by extending trauma theory analysis to non-Western events. They also deemed the theory’s focus on Freudian and deconstructionist approaches as obstacles to their project of fully

“decolonized trauma theory” (Visser, “Decolonizing” 251). This chapter traces the development of trauma genealogically as a term from the late nineteenth century until it was developed as theory by Caruth and others. Additionally, it compares contemporary trauma theory with postcolonial criticism. The last section examines the recent engagement of Arab scholars in the field of trauma studies. I argue that the concept of trauma has been shaped by medical, military, and literary controversies. I explain how both trauma theory and postcolonial criticism can offer a theoretical framework for understanding the representations of traumatic experiences in modern Arabic fiction.

### **Trauma Prior to World War I**

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a growing interest in the concept of trauma. With the advent of new conditions of industrialization and modernity, the urgency to better understand trauma rapidly increased. The question whether to treat trauma as a physical or psychological damage came to the fore and was accompanied by medical and military debates. For instance, the British surgeon, John Erichsen (1818-1896) and the German neurologist, Hermann Oppenheim (1858-1919) reject any association between railway spine and traumatic hysteria and consider trauma as a physical damage. On the other hand, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), Pierre Janet (1858-1947) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) focus on the psychological aspects of trauma, especially hysteria. Unlike most doctors, who identify hysteria as a female malady that was “apt to appear in young women who were especially rebellious” (Showalter 145), Charcot, Janet, and Freud explain that hysteria is not simply a female disorder and the hysterical symptoms can occur in men as well (148).

As a pioneer in the field of traumatic memory, Janet provides a new understanding of how the mind processes memories. He explains that while some memories are evanescent, certain events “would leave indelible and distressing memories-memories to which the sufferer was continually returning, and by which he was tormented by day and by night” (589). Janet draws a distinction between ordinary (narrative) memories and traumatic memories. He observes that ordinary memories can be restored and retrieved at the individual’s will: “the teller must not only know how to do it but must also know how to associate the happening with the other events of his life, how to put it in its place in that life-history which each of us is perpetually building up and which for each of us is an essential element of his personality” (662). While ordinary memory is sequential and records events in a chronological order, it is mostly associated with events that are not considered overwhelming and extraordinary (662). They are also flexible, and the individual can either forget or remember them when they are triggered by a similar event. Most importantly, the individual has the ability to narrate these memories as stories and mention specific details when recalling them (662-665).

Janet explains that, contrary to ordinary memories, traumatic memories are non-sequential and do not follow chronological order. When traumatized individuals are asked to narrate their traumatic memories, they often provide fragmented descriptions, more of images rather than stories (663). Janet adds that “the subject is often incapable of making with regard to the event the recital which we speak of as a memory; and yet he remains confronted by a difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part” (663). These traumatic narratives may include lapses, fainting, crying, random images, fancies, and moments of silence. Janet also observes that while ordinary memories are

coherent and can be ordered, traumatic memories are disordered and appear intermittently. They are also characterized by their intrusive reappearance, especially when they are triggered by similar circumstances (661). In their analysis of Janet's distinction between ordinary and traumatic memories, Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart explain that traumatic memories may disturb survivors more than the original overwhelming event. First, they haunt survivors in flashbacks and dreams. Their intrusive and sudden appearance deteriorates the survivor's psyche. Second, they compel survivors to enact their traumatic past and relive it as if they were experiencing it anew (164).

Similar to Janet, Freud proposes several theories that provide sophisticated psychological interpretations of trauma. In his theory of "compulsion to repeat" or "repetition compulsion," Freud suggests that the traumatic experiences inflict their victims with intrusive memories that will repeatedly appear. In "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through", Freud notes that the victims act out his forgotten or repressed memory: "He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (150). Freud uses the term "compulsion" to emphasize the passivity his patients and their inability to stop these memories from disturbing them. Additionally, for him these memories must be repetitious and revisit trauma survivors again and again in order to be considered traumatic.

Freud develops the concept of "repetition compulsion" after he diagnoses the survivors of railway accidents. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud explains that in railway accidents, individuals may leave the scene unhurt and without showing any sign of physical or mental damage. However, weeks later, the memories of these accidents may return in form of flashbacks and nightmares:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a ‘traumatic neurosis.’ (105)

Thus, leaving the scene physically unhurt does not guarantee that these survivors will not sustain mental scars that will haunt them in their lives. Freud’s theory of “compulsion to repeat,” therefore, explains that traumatic memories are repeated and compulsive, forcing the survivors to reenact the original trauma. The reenactment of trauma turns the survivor from a passive victim into a “master of the situation” (Freud, *Beyond* 11).

### **Trauma and World War I**

World War I, with its new military technology, produced veterans who exhibited symptoms which presented difficult riddles to their physicians. Freud encountered a new condition in the context of war: namely, shell shock. The physicians in the army used the term “shell shock” to refer to “the dazed, disoriented state many soldiers experienced during combat or shortly thereafter, and attributed the condition to unseen physiological damage caused by exploding artillery shells” (Scott 296). Freud’s previous cases were within the individual realm and generally focused on internal causes for psychological disturbance. With the outbreak of the war and the evacuation of many soldiers to hospitals, Freud paid more attention to external events, particularly World War I.

Many soldiers who participated in the war were hospitalized, having sustained mental breakdown. They suffered from numbness, shivering, loss of hearing and seeing, sudden burst of laughter, and crying. While these reactions were deemed cowardly by the British and French armies, such responses often appeared immediately when soldiers were exposed to heavy shelling or protracted bombardment. Consequently, Freud developed his theory of traumatic neurosis and included soldiers' cases. In his introduction to *Psychoanalysis and War Neurosis* (1918), Freud claimed that wars cause internal conflict that leads to traumatic neurosis: "The conflict takes place between the old ego of peace time and the new war-ego of the soldier, and it becomes acute as soon as the peace-ego is faced with the danger of being killed through the risky undertakings of his newly formed parasitical double" (2-3). Indeed, the casualties of the Great War urged Freud to consider war as an additional etiology of trauma.

Following his appointment at Craiglockhart War Hospital, a medical institution that was designated for treating soldiers who suffered from shell shock, the English physician, William Rivers (1864-1922), used very humane techniques in treating his patients. Influenced by Freud and Breuer, he believed that "the essential causes of the psycho-neuroses of warfare are mental, and not physical" (7-8). Rivers rejected the excessive use of electric shock in the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers (faradizations). Rivers argues that electric shocks might provide temporary treatment for the soldiers but did not prepare them to return to the front lines and might cause other psychological disturbances. He befriended his patients, made them participate in their treatment, and encouraged them to participate in activities that made them get over their traumatic memories. For instance, he allowed the soldiers to play tennis, billiards, croquet, cricket, golf, and other games, trying to help them

overcome their fear (Shepard 85). Judith Herman maintains that Rivers' friendly therapeutic strategy helped him establish "two principles that would be embraced by the British and American military psychiatrists in the next war" (22). First, even the bravest soldiers could feel fear. Second, "the most effective motivation to overcome that fear was something stronger than patriotism, abstract principles, or hatred of the enemy. It was the love of soldiers for one another" (22). Rivers was also known for his "talking cure" treatment, which gave patients the chance to talk about their painful experiences (22). Talking helped patients transform these traumatic memories from intangible images and fragments into coherent stories. Rather than being silenced, the patients were able to narrate their traumatic memories and make them ordinary ones.

### **Trauma During World War II and Aftermath**

In World War II, the terms "combat fatigue" or "battle fatigue" replaced the name "shell-shock" and were used in military to describe the psychiatric casualties of the war (Myers 25). Victims of combat fatigue displayed a range of behaviors that reflected their inability to join the fighting. These symptoms included fatigue, hallucinations, depression, tremor, among others (Myers 25). Not only soldiers who were involved in the fighting displayed signs of combat fatigue, many soldiers showed some battle symptoms even before joining the combat. The British and Americans adopted preventive methods to reduce the number of combat fatigue casualties, including: "the placing of psychiatrists in combat areas, the introduction of incentives in the form of rotating tours of duty, the improvement of group morale and cohesion, better management and training of men, more effective



leadership and command” (Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* 219). Albert J. Glass, a very influential American physician in favor of preventive psychiatry, maintains that “the key principles of prevention were immediacy, proximity, and expectancy: the soldier was to be treated as *immediately* possible, as *proximate* or near to his unit as feasible, and his treatment was to be undertaken with the *expectation* that he would be returned to duty” (Leys 221). Since combat fatigue was viewed as a transient disorder, there was “no recognition of the chronic form of the condition” (223).

The British psychiatrist, William Sargant, favored an abreactive therapy in treating traumatized soldiers.<sup>4</sup> In 1940, during his work at an emergency hospital in London, Sargant saw extreme cases of war neuroses in which soldiers suffered from depression, loss of memory, hysteria, and many symptoms “that one would never see in such abundance except during war – unless perhaps after an earthquake or railway accident when the most normal people are apt to break down” (Sargant 86-87). After the Dunkirk evacuation, he developed abreaction techniques and used barbiturate drug, sedative injection, and sodium amytal to relieve the traumatic experiences of the military patients (Leys 191). Sargant also rediscovered the method of cathartic abreaction which Breuer and Freud had used in the 1890s to treat hysteria (192). In *The Traumatic Neurosis of War* (1941), the American psychoanalyst therapist, Abram Kardiner, recognized the effectiveness of abreaction in acute cases, but he claims that it has no long-term benefits when treating chronic problems (216). Glass rejected abreaction because it required physicians to “join in the dramatic performance,

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<sup>4</sup> The American Psychiatric Association defines Abreaction as “an emotional release or discharge after recalling a painful experience that had been repressed because it was consciously intolerable. A therapeutic effect sometimes occurs through partial discharge or desensitization of the painful emotions and increased insight” (1).

thereby encouraging him to identify with the soldier's suffering at the expense of his identification with the larger goal of winning the war" (Leys 222).<sup>5</sup>

With the increasing debate about the psychological effects of Vietnam War on U.S. veterans, the term, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), came into use in 1980 (Jones and Wessely 111). Anti-war campaigns, doctors, and veterans played an important role collecting evidence about the delayed effects of the war (111). While "post-Vietnam syndrome", "catastrophic stress disorder", and "post-combat stress reaction" were suggested terms, none of them found favor among the American medical professionals (111). The publication of the third edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) gave rise to the term PTSD. The term was widely recognized, and the third edition became responsible for a great transformation in the theory and practice of mental health in the United States (Mayes and Horwitz 249). The scientific approach and the common language that the DSM-III uses significantly contributed to the standardization of the criteria used for classifying mental disorders. The APA identified a set of symptoms that PTSD victims may suffer: "The characteristic symptoms involve re-experiencing the traumatic event; numbing of responsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the external world; and a variety of autonomic, dysphoric, or cognitive symptoms" (Spitzer et al. 236). These symptoms are generally defined as "outside the range of usual human experience" (236).

Rick Mayes and Allan Horwitz maintain that the diagnostically based DSM-III created a revolution in the classification of mental illness and compelled psychiatry to adopt

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<sup>5</sup> *Trauma: A Genealogy* by Ruth Leys provides a history of the concept of trauma during World War II in greater detail. In this dissertation, I only recall some of her theses.

the new system (250). They add that psychiatry transformed from a “discipline where diagnosis played a marginal role to one where it became the basis of the specialty” (250). The DSM-III relied on a diagnostic model that “emphasized categories of illness rather than blurry boundaries between normal and abnormal behavior, dichotomies rather than dimensions, and overt symptoms rather than underlying etiological mechanisms” (250). The executive officer of the American Psychiatric Association, Melvin Sabshin, called the movement from the DSM-I and II to the DSM-III a victory of “science over ideology” (qtd. in Mayes and Horwitz 250). Somatic psychiatrists claim that “the old psychiatry derives from theory, the new psychiatry from fact” (qtd. in Mayes and Horwitz 31). Mayes and Horwitz conclude that the standardized model of psychiatry that the DSM-III introduced ended a deep crisis in the discipline, changed how society view mental health, and offered an objective way to define mental illness (252).

### **Trauma Theory**

Trauma theory came to prominence in the early-to-mid-1990s as a product of what is called “the ethical turn” in the humanities and social sciences. From its very inception, the theory urged for establishing a new mode of “reading and listening” that aims to “turn criticism back towards being an ethical, responsible, purposive discourse, listening to the wounds of the other” (Luckhurst “Mixing Memories” 506). The works of Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Cathy Caruth developed a new mode of critical engagement that aimed to enable readers to gain access to extreme political,

historical, and ethical experiences that seems to defy representation.<sup>6</sup> Relying mostly on deconstructionist and psychoanalytical approaches, those works went beyond the sole focus on the pathology of the traumatic experience and emphasized the belated consequences of trauma. Caruth argues that rather than turning us away from history and causing “political and ethical paralysis” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 10), a poststructuralist approach helps us “recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential” (11). Consequently, trauma theorists underline the importance of ethical commitment in their critical practice.

Caruth explains that there is no firm definition of trauma, but she states that the term can be generally used to describe “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). In her preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth maintains that no specific rules can explain all cases of trauma: “there is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories we encounter” (ix). She adds that understanding trauma requires close cooperation between different disciplines: “that the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses—responses of knowing and of acting—of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism” (ix). She further confirms that through multifaceted approach to trauma, “we can learn, in effect, not only to ease the suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for

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<sup>6</sup> Along with Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), the following sources are among the foundational texts that gave rise to trauma theory: Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), and Geoffrey Hartman’s “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies” (1995).

change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness” (ix). Similarly, in *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst argues that in order to understand the notion of trauma, it is important to use different approaches of criticism. By varying the approaches, one can unravel the complexity of trauma “whose enigmatic causation and strange effects that bridge the mental and the physical, the individual and collective, and use in many diverse disciplinary languages consequently provoke perplexed, contentious debate” (Luckhurst 15).

Caruth focuses on literary and theoretical texts that foreground the delayed consequences of trauma and calls the traumatic experience a “double wound” (3). Relying on Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth concludes that unlike the physical wound, which can be “a simple and healable event” (*Unclaimed* 4), the wound of the mind does not manifest itself immediately after the traumatizing experience, but it remains hidden and appears belatedly. She states that the psychological damage of the traumatic event is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). While heavily indebted to Freud’s writing, Caruth’s notion of trauma is “much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche” (4). Trauma, therefore, deals with the psychological wound that unconsciously “cries out [and] ... addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4).

Caruth introduces Freud’s analysis of a scene from the Italian epic poem *La Gerusalemme Liberata* by Torquato Tasso. She uses the “parable” of Tancred and Clorinda that Freud discusses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in order to explain that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the

survivor and against his very will” (2). Tasso’s poem tells the story of Tancred, who mistakenly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she was disguised as a man in the enemy’s army. After her burial, Tancred went to a forest and started cutting down a tree. Suddenly, blood flew out of the stem and Tancred heard Clorinda’s voice complaining that he had wounded her again. Caruth claims that similar to Tancred, who did not hear Clorinda’s voice until he wounded her again, trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Caruth suggests that this literary example serves as a parable of “the unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma in Freud’s writings” as well as the relationship between literature and theory (3).

The process of telling traumatic experiences may reveal a crisis of witnessing. Thomas Elsaesser explains that since the traces of the event are often absent, the acts of bearing witness or representing trauma bring stories of “suspended origin” (194). Susannah Radstone states that in trauma theory, “the relation between representation and ‘actuality’ might be reconceived as one constituted by the absence of traces” (12). The lack of explicit evidence and the disappearance of traces led Dari Laub to describe the Holocaust, as “an event without a witness” (Felman and Laub 211). In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman and Laub describe the process of rethinking of the cataclysmic traumatic memories as:

[t]he indirect expressions of—or belated testimonies to—the radical crisis of witnessing ... and to the consequent, ongoing, as yet unresolved crisis of history, a crisis which in turn is translated into a crisis of literature insofar as literature becomes

a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated (xviii).

Focusing on victims who survived the Nazi death camps and whom Laub encountered in his psychoanalytic practice, Felman and Laub claim that the crisis of witnessing leads trauma victims to withdraw into silence or retreat into an incoherent prose, where they question “the very possibility of representation” (xviii).

While Felman and Laub argue that trauma creates a crisis of testimony as it is beyond representation, they think of bearing witness as the only way to overcome this historical impossibility. Felman paradoxically claims that “art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness and yet escape the subtly omnipresent and the almost unavoidable cultural betrayal both of history and of the victims” (34). Laub also argues that testimony is necessary not only for telling the truth but for survival as well: “repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation” (85). He adds that testimony is not only important for telling about how the traumatic experience was, but it is decisive in shaping the future life of the survivor.

Laub suggests as a historical traumatic experience, the Holocaust has three levels of witnessing: “the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (61). The first level requires an “autobiographical awareness” and vivid memory of the traumatic experience (61-62). On the second level, the witness does not participate in the event itself but in receiving the account given of them. The witness here

only “participates in the reliving and reexperiencing of the event ... [becoming] part of the struggle to go beyond the event and not be submerged and lost in it” (62). On the third level, the witness and the listeners “alternate between moving closer and then retreating from the experience—with the sense that there is a truth that [they] are both trying to reach” (62). By the time the witness provides testimony, “the traumatic experience has normally long been submerged and has become distorted in its submersion. The horror of the historical experience is maintained in the testimony only as an elusive memory that feels as if it no longer resembles any reality” (62). The process of witnessing may present a distorted version of the actual event, but silence perpetuates “the power and the victory of that delusion” (68).

The idea that the traumatic experience stands beyond representation found favor among many trauma theorists (Stampfl 15). Scholars such as Caruth, Felman, Laub, and Hartman, who wrote about particular experiences, accepted the unspeakable trope and based many of their assumptions on it. For instance, Caruth relies on Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) to explain that trauma is not fully comprehended and, thus, needs not to be conceived within the realm of representation. She states that “[f]or history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (*Trauma: Explorations* 8). In “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” Geoffrey Hartman contends that the knowledge of trauma cannot be made “entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion” (537). He adds that the contradictory nature of trauma challenges our understanding and distorts any process of coherent representation: “[traumatic knowledge] is



as close to nescience as to knowledge. Any general description or modeling of trauma, therefore, risks being figurative itself, to the point of mythic fantasmagoria” (537).

While many notable scholars of trauma theory deny the very possibility of representing traumatic experiences, a group of critics, including Ruth Leys, Michael Rothberg, and Dominick LaCapra disagree with that claim (Stampfl 15). They think that the atrocities of the Holocaust and that of other catastrophic events can be “researched, mentally digested, and expressed” (Stampfl 15). In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Leys explains that since the late nineteenth century, there have been two competing tendencies within trauma studies: mimetic (non-representational) and anti-mimetic (representational) paradigms (8). According to the mimetic model, trauma was a “situation of dissociation or ‘absence’ from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor of traumatic scene in a condition that likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance” (8). The traumatic experiences here appear to “shatter the victim’s cognitive-perceptual capacities, [making] the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection” (9). The anti-mimetic model views trauma “as if it were a purely external event coming to a sovereign if passive victim” (10). It tries to establish “a strict dichotomy between the autonomous subject and the external trauma” (9). While the mimetic theorists argue that the patients have access to their memories through belated flashbacks and nightmares, the anti-mimetic scholars suggest that victims of trauma act out “in a conscious, consensual, and voluntary fashion” (165). Accusing Caruth of adopting the mimetic paradigm, Leys writes: “by imagining that trauma stands outside representation altogether, she [Caruth] also embraces a version—in fact it is more like an inadvertent parody—of the mimetic theory” (17).

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominic LaCapra also criticizes the denial of the process of representation. He discusses two trauma mechanisms: “acting out” and “working through.” LaCapra suggests that early trauma criticism focused on “acting-out,” where one is “performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop” (21). He adds that “[i]n acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene” (21). Working-through, on the other hand, is an articulatory process that involves:

the possibility of making distinctions or developing articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability, particularly when the latter is tantamount to confusion and the obliteration or blurring of all distinctions (states that may indeed occur in trauma or in acting out posttraumatic conditions). (22)

LaCapra explains that working-through helps the survivors of trauma to distance themselves from the painful past, engage in the present, and try to come to term with it (147). He maintains that he took these two concepts from Freud and other psychoanalytic works and developed them because they can be “interesting for use in historical studies” (141).

LaCapra describes “working through” as a “desirable process” because it helps the patient “to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future” (143). While LaCapra believes that working through may not lead to full cure from trauma, he suggests that it is an interactive process in which the patients are not passive victims. It gives the patients the agency to represent and talk about their experiences. Working through is desirable for LaCapra because one “is able to distinguish between past

and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one ... back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (22). LaCapra concludes that “[i]n recent criticism..., there has perhaps been too much of a tendency to become fixated on acting-out, on the repetition-compulsion, to see it as a way of preventing closure, harmonization, any facile notion of cure” (145). The recent criticism also tends to “eliminate or obscure any other possible response, or simply to identify all working through as closure, totalization, full cure, full mastery” (145). LaCapra’s criticism of Caruth’s Freudian model of trauma, which is widely accused of denying the possibility of full recovery in the post-traumatic stage, found favor among postcolonial trauma theorists (Visser, “Decolonizing” 254).

In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), Jeffrey Alexander and a group of distinguished sociologists develop a new approach to cultural trauma by applying it to several case studies, including procommunist societies, the Holocaust, slavery in the United States, and the September 11 attacks. Alexander explains that trauma does not only cause pain to the individuals, but it can affect the entire society. Calling this social phenomenon “cultural trauma,” he argues that it “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Alexander rejects the idea that trauma emerges from the events themselves, claiming that “events are not inherently traumatic” (8). He adds that “trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction” (8). Cultural trauma, therefore, is a social construction that is not

created by the event itself but shaped by the society that fosters it during a process of building a collective group identity.

In the same book, Neil Smelser claims that regardless of the severity of the event, it can only be qualified as traumatic under certain conditions. These conditions depend on “the sociocultural context of the affected society at the time the historical event or situation arises” (36). He adds that some events may qualify for the status of trauma at a certain point in history but not in another, such as the French Revolution, which had been considered as a cultural trauma for decades but does not have the same status at this time (36). Smelser proposes a formal definition that clarifies the conditions an event needs in order to acquire the status of cultural trauma: “A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society’s [or group’s] existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions” (44). Therefore, for an event to qualify as a cultural trauma, first, “it must be remembered or made to be remembered” (36). Second, the memory “must be made culturally relevant, that is, represented as obliterating, damaging, or rendering problematic something sacred” (36). Finally, the memory “must be associated with a strong negative affect, usually disgust, shame, or guilt” (36). Indeed, for Smelser, cultural trauma is “historically made, not born” and that depends on the agencies and mechanisms that are involved in the process of shaping and representing it (37).

The rise of trauma as a concept and later as a theory not only helped readers interpret literature in various ways, but also had great influence on how literary writers conceptualize trauma. In *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead traces the ways in which

trauma theory is reflected in contemporary fiction. She maintains that “[n]ovelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (3). She adds that there are numerous stylistic features that recur in many postmodern trauma narratives, including “intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” (84). Laurie Vickroy explains that trauma narratives “go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study” (3). Those narratives try to “internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures” (3). Vickroy adds that writers of trauma fiction are also armed with different tools that help them express many complicated experiences, such as “silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression” (3). She also emphasizes the influence of trauma narrative in raising awareness toward “the ways social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma” (4). For instance, Vickroy analyzes how a well-known novel like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* exposes readers to the effects of living under social subjugation on entire communities such as African Americans.

In *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014), Alan Gibbs criticizes what he calls “the hegemony in trauma theory of a particular and restrictive conception of how trauma should operate in the literary text” (33). He claims that in the last three decades, many American fiction writers adopted “conventional and reassuring ways of thinking about trauma, most notably PTSD and the Freudian-Caruthian models” (33).<sup>7</sup> The well-established

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Gibbs mentions Siri Hustvedt’s *What I Loved*, Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* as some examples of American works that are influenced by the modes of representations that trauma theory had established.

body of trauma theory influenced the emergent traumatic metafiction and imposed its formulaic mode of representation on those contemporary American writers, who were overwhelmed by what Kirby Farrell calls the “ready-to-wear trauma” (Farrell 31). Gibbs maintains that the contemporary trauma genre lacks innovations as many writers replicate in their works “genre clichés or representational conventions with sufficient accuracy” and introduce them as genuine traumatic experiences (Gibbs 34). Gibbs includes Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* as an example of a work that was originally published as a Holocaust memoir but later vilified as a faked autobiography (34). He adds that many trauma fiction authors writing in the 1990s and afterwards unwittingly helped to construct the conventions of trauma representation by employing identical literary techniques including “abrupt ellipses, non-linear chronology, and shifts in narrating voice,” which became very common for readers (35).

Laura Brown, on the other hand, uses a feminist approach to criticize the DSM’s characterization of the causes of trauma. She argues that by limiting the definition of trauma to events that are “outside the range of usual human experience,” DSM-III excludes many traumatic events that happen regularly in the lives of women and people who do not belong to the dominant culture (100). She gives an example of a legal case of one of her patients, who was sexually abused by her step-father and suffered from PTSD symptoms. Brown maintains that the perpetrator’s attorney claimed that sexual abuse is not traumatic because it happens to many women daily, and it is not diagnosed as an event outside the range of human experience (101). Brown explains that the problem stems from the dominant discourse of trauma, where “the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied,

educated, middle-class, Christian men” (101). For Brown, a feminist analysis exposes the dangers of insidious trauma, which refers to “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). She concludes that a feminist approach to trauma helps us stop the cycle of oppression against women, people of color, gay and lesbian people, poor classes, disabled people, and other minorities (102-103).

Despite her very influential role in trauma theory, Caruth’s reliance on deconstructionist and psychoanalytic theories has been the subject of criticism during the last two decades. A range of scholars from different fields view her theoretical approach as ahistorical and apolitical that focuses on internal experiences and limits the representations of trauma. For instance, Leys maintains that “in the course of the past several years the deconstructive theory informing Caruth’s approach has lost much of its appeal, with the result that trauma theory has been modified” (“Trauma and the Turn” 5). One of the main critiques of Caruth’s model is her description of trauma as a crisis of historical experience that “extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we – in this era – can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access” (*Trauma: Explorations* 6). In “Introduction: The Instance of Trauma,” De Graef et al. criticize Caruth’s approach to history, maintaining that “it always courts the risk of unduly generalising traumatic experience to the point of banality, scandalously slighting the suffering whose testimony gave it its foothold” (248-49). It also “runs that risk precisely because it does articulate the crisis of experience brought to blinding light in trauma as a general condition which involves nothing less than ‘a crisis of truth’ itself” (249).

As a leading figure in trauma theory, Dominick LaCapra also criticizes Caruth's claims that trauma challenges representation, comprehension, and recovery. He writes: "Caruth here seems dangerously close to conflating absence (of absolute foundations and total meaning or knowledge) with loss and even sacralizing, or making sublime, the compulsive repetition or acting-out of a traumatic past" (*History in Transit* 121). He adds that by emphasizing the acting-out of trauma, Caruth forecloses any possibility of working-through, representing "some long-standing religious views relating to a radically transcendent, inscrutable divinity and his mysterious, nonsymbolizable, unreadable, or unrepresentable ways" (122). Susannah Radstone also criticizes Caruth, Felman, and Laub's use of a psychoanalytic approach that emphasizes "the dissociation of unassimilated memories" (16). Building on Ley's criticism, Radstone adds that "[t]rauma theory's topography of the inner world dispenses with the layering of conscious/subconscious and unconscious, substituting for them a conscious mind in which past experiences are accessible, and a dissociated area of the mind from which traumatic past experiences cannot be accessed" (16). Despite the wide criticism, Toremans maintains that "the very fact that trauma studies is time and again forced to return to its theoretical foundations in Caruth's articulation of Freudian psychoanalysis with de Manian deconstruction is testimony to its relevance for the further development of the field" (65).

### **Postcolonial Trauma**

Similar to many scholars from different disciplines, postcolonial critics showed an increasing interest in trauma theory and saw an urgent need to begin a long-standing project



of decolonizing trauma studies. Although the number of publications addressing postcolonial trauma has been climbing steadily since 2008, postcolonial scholars still critique the limitations of the theory, claiming that it does not offer adequate tools for postcolonial criticism. While Rothberg, for instance, asks whether the Eurocentric structure of the theory can offer “the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world” (226), Irene Visser and other postcolonial trauma theorists still debate “whether trauma theory can be effectively ‘postcolonialized’ in the sense of being usefully conjoined with postcolonial theory” (Visser, “Trauma Theory” 270). In the last decade, a group of postcolonial scholars such as Stef Craps, Gert Buelens, and Irene Visser worked on identifying a more precise and comprehensive formulation of trauma theory. They also tried to discover new possibilities that can expand the limitations of the theory and its conceptual framework. The openness of postcolonial trauma theory to different disciplines provided it with multiple critical approaches and helped its critics gain access to different traumatic experiences. Relying mainly on literary texts, postcolonial trauma theory aims to explore the ways in which postcolonial literature expresses new possibilities toward the perception of trauma, its consequences, and potential recovery.

In the 2008 special issue of *Studies in the Novel*, titled as *Postcolonial Trauma Novels*, editors, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens introduced an ambitious project that aimed at creating what Visser calls a “rapprochement between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies” (Visser, “Decolonizing” 250). The essays in the issue surveyed a wide array of trauma literature and explored such topics as the legacy of colonialism in Africa, slavery, trauma of the Indian Americans, and several other traumatic examples from the Global South. They also took several important steps toward what Michael Rothberg calls a project

of “decolonizing trauma studies.” Rothberg maintains that the essays “contribute to the creation of an alternative canon of trauma novels that should have significant pedagogical implications-within postcolonial studies ... [and] within an English studies curriculum that remains ... too wedded to a relatively narrow range of Anglo-American works” (Rothberg, “Decolonizing” 226). He adds that the essays demonstrate “the importance of literature and literary studies as modes of understanding and responding to political violence-a topic all too relevant in a world of ongoing genocide and neo-imperial war” (226).

The rapid expansion of trauma studies in the 1990s also attracted several postcolonial scholars who started to discuss how recent approaches of trauma theory can broaden and universalize the postcolonial perspective of victimhood. Several postcolonial scholars initiated a thorough review of Geoffrey Hartman’s argument on how trauma theory offers a new perspective and “operates at the level of theory, and of exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning” (544). This review resulted in a heated debate in 2010, at the University of Vienna, Austria, conference titled “Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel,” between some scholars who questioned the theory’s relevance to postcolonial studies. In that conference, a group of distinguished postcolonial critics and several scholars who work on the concept of trauma discussed the controversies, complexities, and the exegetical value of trauma theory for postcolonial literary studies. They acknowledged that “trauma theory’s influence is indubitably an important and as yet unresolved issue in contemporary postcolonial criticism” (Visser, “Trauma Theory” 271). Visser maintains that the conference demonstrated the premise that “trauma theory has strengths that postcolonial literary studies can incorporate, as well as weaknesses that can be corrected or reconfigured” (271). The outcomes of the conference emphasized the obstacles

to such a reconfiguration, raising central questions about the complexity of applying trauma theory to non-western cultures (271).

Postcolonial critics often criticize the incomprehensibility of trauma and consider its inaccessibility as a defect that marks the theory and confuses its followers. For instance, Visser describes trauma theory as “practically unknowable and unteachable” (“Trauma Theory” 271). She cites the definition of the DSM-III, which states that trauma involves an “existence of recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone” (238). In *From Guilt To Shame*, Leys notes that for a long time, the definitions and criteria of trauma were ambiguous: “from the start what was lacking was a clear definition of what constituted a recognizable stressor, as well as methods to operationalize and objectify the traumatic experience” (95). In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Leys states that “the field of trauma studies today not only continues to lack cohesion, but the very terms in which PTSD is described tend to produce controversy (6). Allan Young also contends that the concept of trauma lacks coherence and specificity, and “it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources” (5).

Apart from the problem of the lack of specific definitions of trauma, the ethical premise of the theory caused a controversy among some literary critics. Those scholars criticized the excessive use of poststructuralist insights in trauma theory, claiming that it leads to what Caruth calls a “political and ethical paralysis” (*Unclaimed* 10). To defend the theory’s self-declared ethical commitment and openness to different historical experiences, Caruth states that through the critical practice of trauma theory “we can understand that a

rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). She adds that trauma theory offers a “new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” (9). Most importantly, Caruth concludes her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* by stating that: “in a catastrophic age ... trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (11).

If Caruth claims that trauma forms a bridge between different cultures, Craps and Buelens argue that the foundational texts of trauma theory, including Caruth’s works, reflect a Eurocentric bias (2). They add that they are “almost exclusively concerned with traumatic experiences of white Westerners and solely employ critical methodologies emanating from a Euro-American context” (2). Craps and Buelens argue that instead of functioning as an ethical impetus and promoting solidarity between cultures, trauma theory risks producing opposite results: “by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world” (2). While Caruth’s model of trauma is criticized for ignoring the colonial history, a group of thinkers from different disciplines such as Dirk Moses, Jurgen Zimmerer, and Dan Stone tried to address the imbalance by comparing a few examples of colonial atrocities to that of the Shoah.

The project of decolonizing trauma theory and creating an “rapprochement” between trauma studies and postcolonial theory intended to situate postcolonial trauma in a more globalized paradigm. In order to accomplish this goal, scholars of postcolonial trauma had to

deal urgently with central issues, including: “trauma theory’s Eurocentric, event-based conception of trauma; its too-narrow focus on Freudian psychoanalysis; and its deconstructionist approach that closes off other approaches to literary trauma” (Visser, “Decolonizing” 252). Well aware of the need for a redirection in the theory, Rothberg states that “as long as trauma studies foregoes comparative study and remains tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses (such as the Holocaust) and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories” (Rothberg, “Decolonizing” 227). Postcolonial literary trauma rapidly expanded and started to address more issues such as the notion of melancholia, the function of narrative, the spiritual modes of addressing trauma, and the necessity to move toward a sociological and anthropological framework and going beyond the deconstructionist or psychoanalytical approaches to trauma.

Several postcolonial critics, including, Stef Craps, Ewald Mengel, and Michela Borzaga, contend that there is already rich non-Western body of literature and criticism dealing with trauma and its consequences on the colonies. Borzaga considers Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) as foundational texts that postcolonial trauma theory needs to build on (Mengel and Borzaga xviii). However, Ogaga Ifowodo explains that postcolonial works focused mostly on “the politico-cultural dimension of postcoloniality” and marginalized the psychological sphere (x). For Ifowodo, Fanon is the only pre-disciplinary postcolonial critic who “located his work in the intersection of a revolutionary anti-imperialist poetics and a revisionist psychoanalysis ... [and] was also daringly prescribed the psychoanalytic procedure for tackling what he called the ‘black problem’” (x). Rebecca Saunders points out that “though rarely read as a trauma theorist, Frantz Fanon draws attention to crucial, yet often overlooked, episodes in the history

of trauma: to the specific forms of trauma produced by colonial wars, by colonization itself, and, more diffusely, by racism” (13).

In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2013), Craps considers Fanon as a pioneer in the history of postcolonial trauma criticism, especially in his works on psychopathology of racism and colonialism (28). He notes that the psychiatric case studies of the Algerian and French patients that Fanon includes in *The Wretched of the Earth* should not only be read as a direct result of the Algerian War of Independence, but they need to be examined within a larger colonial situation (29). He quotes Fanon’s argument that “the truth is that colonization, in its very essence, [before the war] already appeared to be a great purveyor of psychiatric hospitals” (29). Craps adds that examining Fanon’s works on trauma of racial and colonial oppression “brings light to the harm done to marginalized groups by continuous exposure to ‘galaxy of erosive stereotypes’ ... which leads them to develop feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred” (30). Similar to Craps’ views of the importance of Fanon’s works on trauma, Ifowodo emphasizes the necessity of a return to critical Fanonism as it illustrates how postcolonial history is “a history of trauma” (2).

In the same book, Craps develops a new model of postcolonial trauma that relies mostly on the works of Fanon as well as the recent publications in the theory of insidious trauma. This model focuses on the cumulative effects of the everyday racial incidents and the subtle marginalization of minorities. Craps states that his model aims to “take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance that these contexts invite or necessitate” (5). Sonya Andermahr explains that Craps’ model is necessary for postcolonial trauma theory because it addresses “the globalized contexts of traumatic

events, the specific forms traumatic suffering takes, and the myriad ways in which it is represented in literary works” (2). She adds that this model of decolonized theory would deal with the “marginalization of non-Western and minority traumas” (2). It would also “provide alternatives to dominant trauma aesthetics; and . . ., address the underexplored relationship between so-called First and Third World traumas” (2).

Postcolonial trauma theory emphasizes the importance of addressing the experiences of both victims and their perpetrators. Rothberg and Gibbs criticize the lack of critical works that study perpetrator trauma and explain the imperial implications of this phenomenon. They state that studying the perpetrator trauma does not necessarily mean acquitting the perpetrator of his guilt or blurring the division between victims and victimizers. Rothberg explains that “the categories of victim and perpetrator derive from either a legal or a moral discourse, but the concept of trauma emerges from a diagnostic realm that lies beyond guilt and innocence or good and evil” (*Multidirectional* 90). He adds that since trauma “has the potential to cloud ethical and political judgments,” critics should not deal with it as a “category that confirms moral value” (90). Gibbs maintains that since many writers and artists have widely dealt with perpetrator trauma, critics should not refuse to discuss this category. He adds that many contemporary literary texts such as Joel Turnipseed’s *Baghdad Express* and Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead* “make dubious claims to victimhood, or employ rhetorical tropes to overturn the political realities underlying destructive American incursions” into other countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq (168). Gibbs confirms that “ignoring perpetrator trauma might . . . make critics complicit with a discourse which inverts victim status and projects it onto America, by allowing it to pass unchallenged” (168).

Rothberg’s comparative approach to literature and memory studies has significantly developed the project of decolonizing trauma theory. Rothberg introduces a theory of “multidirectional memory,” in which he uses a model of cross-cultural analysis that provides postcolonial trauma with new critical tools to challenge “the hierarchical and/or exclusivist approach to chronicling collective traumas— ‘either mine or yours’” (Andermahr 3). In *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), Rothberg explains,

Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative ... This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory.

(3)

Rothberg offers a framework of thinking in which memories do not compete but work productively together. For him, the emphasis on the Holocaust, for instance, should not marginalize other traumatic experiences such as colonialism and slavery, and the adoption of the Holocaust rhetoric does not necessarily mean relativizing or denying its uniqueness.<sup>8</sup> Hence, Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory” opposes the idea of “competitive memory” and offers more appreciation to a model of interactive memories that brings together cross-cultural histories and literatures.

In a special issue published in 2015, Sonya Andermahr et al. “explore the complex and contested relationship between trauma studies and postcolonial criticism” (Andermahr

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<sup>8</sup> Rothberg refers here to Walter Benn Michaels’s account on the tension between the memory of Holocaust and that of slavery in contemporary America. Michaels criticizes the way that an African American activist, Khalid Muhammad, expressed his frustration of commemorating the Holocaust and ignoring the history of slavery in the United States.



500). Andermahr states that the issue focuses on literature and the ways it can respond to the ongoing challenge of creating a “decolonized trauma theory that attends to and accounts for the suffering of minority groups and non-Western cultures, broadly defined as cultures beyond Western Europe and North America” (500). The issue responded to the call to go beyond the Eurocentric paradigm of trauma theory that Stef Craps proposed in *Postcolonial Witnessing*. In that book, Craps maintained that most of the foundational texts of trauma theory failed in four aspects:

they marginalise or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority trauma. (2)

The essays in the volume admit that the traditional event-based model of trauma does not necessarily work for non-Western or minority group trauma. By addressing those problems, the authors tried to envision a more globalized model of trauma and interrogate the current structure of trauma theory.

In her article, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory”, Visser proposes a few steps for developing the project of decolonizing trauma theory. She argues that in order to reach the ideal of a truly decolonized trauma theory, postcolonial criticism needs to review the notion of melancholia, revalue the function of narrative, and expand trauma theory approaches. When it comes to melancholia, Visser maintains that in Caruth’s model of trauma, the emphasis is often on “the affirmation of the crippling effects of trauma” (254). In *The*

*Trauma Question*, Luckhurst observes that in trauma theory, there is “a kind of injunction to maintain the post-traumatic condition” (210). He adds that “to be in a frozen or suspended afterwards, it seems to be assumed, is the only proper ethical response to trauma, displacing any other memorial relation to the past and situating memory entirely under the sign of post-traumatic melancholia” (210). For Visser, the aftermath of colonial trauma should not be “expressed only in terms of weakness, victimization, and melancholia” (254); on the contrary, “themes of social activism, recuperation, and psychic resilience” need to be emphasized. She maintains that postcolonial criticism “cannot maintain the ‘injunction’ to regard malaise and melancholia, with their connotations of submissiveness and inaction, as the inevitable outcome of traumatization” (254-255). Visser claims that despite the damaging effects of trauma, healing, growth, and rejuvenation are possible in the aftermath of colonial trauma.

The debate about the value of narrative is one of the major issues that postcolonial criticism tries to resolve. Accusing early trauma theorists of rejecting the “therapeutic and recuperative value of narrative” (256), Visser states that Caruth’s theory suggests that trauma cannot be fully understood or expressed in language because “verbal expression of trauma constitutes an affront to understanding, or, even, an act of betrayal of the traumatic memory” (256).<sup>9</sup> Visser explains that this response must “follow from the recognition that trauma cannot be fully verbalized or understood, as expressed in Caruth’s oft-quoted statement that ‘the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it’” (256). However, in *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman views narrative as an effective

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<sup>9</sup> Although Caruth comments on specific literary texts and certain cases of trauma that cannot be healed, postcolonial critics read her work as a categorical rejection of recovery.

method of treatment that leads to healing and recovery. When it comes to postcolonial criticism, Susan Najita, for instance, advocates Caruth's alleged rejection of the role of narrative in recovery and used the term "fetishized narrative of complete recuperation" in her book (62). Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga, on the other hand, expressed a strong objection to Caruth's argument and considered her analysis inadequate to understand trauma in many places like South Africa. Visser states that trauma in South Africa, for instance, is "inextricably involved with the history of apartheid, which has caused the collective traumatization of several generations, and as such, it is neither an unclaimed nor unclaimable experience" (257). She concludes that postcolonial literature provides many examples that support the claim that trauma is "not beyond healing once it is brought to light in narrative" (257).

Visser asserts that in order to fully decolonize trauma theory, the indigenous rituals and cultural practices should be recognized. She explains that the dominant Western models of trauma often marginalize the role of religion and spirituality, "due to the influence of postmodernist theories and poststructuralist antagonism towards religion as 'grand narrative'" (259). While Western secularism associates itself with ideas of tolerance, modernity, and rationality, it introduces any beliefs system different from Christianity as irrational, backward, and intolerant (260). Visser explains that a "decolonized trauma theory... must be one that is sensitive to the cultural bias inherent in the secular perspective that imposes such prejudices" (260). Postcolonial trauma narratives have recently started to engage more with religious and ritual themes to resist the hegemony of both colonialism and secular modes of thinking (261). Postcolonial writers such as Witi Ihimaera and Wole Soyinka, showed in their works how an openness to indigenous religious and ritual practices

may lead victims of trauma to find pathways to recovery and provide them with a sense of hope and identity. While Western trauma literature tends to reject any possibility of recovery and calls for a detachment from spiritual practices (256), postcolonial narrative acknowledges the power of localized modes of beliefs in curing trauma (259). Thus, postcolonial narrative challenges the trauma paradigm that denies the very possibility of recovery and marginalizes the role of spirituality. By adopting a narrative of recovery that incorporates the indigenous beliefs, postcolonial trauma detaches itself from the dominant model of trauma, which often reinforces such themes of melancholia and secularism rather than resilience and faith.

### **Trauma Studies and the Arab World**

If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization. ... The social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged' (Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* 53).

Although Fanon, whose works are often read as precursors to the project of postcolonial trauma, writes about an Arab colonized society in Algeria, Arabic intellectuals have not paid much attention to his work in terms of trauma studies. The lack of critical works addressing trauma in the Arab World is often attributed to political reasons. Most postcolonial Arab governments discourage this kind of scholarship, as they are afraid that these studies may show them as perpetrators of trauma. In a television interview, the novelist Basmah 'Abd al-'Aziz talked about the scarcity of Arabic critical studies on trauma and torture. She explained that the Arab governments prevent scholars from working closely with both victims and perpetrators of trauma and block any data that could be used against them, a

difficult situation that impedes the development of this field (Interview). She adds that when she writes on trauma, she relies on statistics made outside the Arab world on Arab victims, who often flee their homelands and tell their stories in the hosting countries. Blaming totalitarian governments for this lack of scholarship, Abd al-‘Aziz says: “If I go to the ministry of internal affairs [in Egypt] and I give a list of figures who are accused of committing acts of torture. I would not be given a permission to interview anyone or make psychoanalytic studies on those people” (my translation, Interview).

Regardless of the political factors that affect the development of trauma studies in the Arab World, trauma as experience is known but in a broader sense. For instance, in Arabic, *šadmah* is the most common word for trauma, but it can also be used generally to mean “shock”, “blow”, “jolt”, “impact”, “thrust”, among many other uses. This lexical richness does not necessarily reflect an advanced scholarship in this field as most researchers do not receive local support. Unlike many modern theories, such as deconstruction, structuralism, postcolonialism, and Marxism, which found a quick echo in the Arab World, trauma studies are still overshadowed. The severity of events in the Arab World during the last few decades does not correspond with the lack of trauma research, a critical imbalance that has not yet been redressed adequately.

In addition to the political precautions that scholars consider when they write about trauma in the Arab World, translations complicate their efforts. Many writers seek to address a global audience, but they find fictions more demandable in translation and easier to reach a broader audience. Therefore, they adopt fiction to convey their theoretical messages. This challenging situation can be seen in Abd al-‘Aziz’s works, where her fictions found wider local and international readers as opposed to her non-fictional studies which have not been

translated yet. With this urgent demand to speak about trauma in the Arab World, Arabic scholars face a hard task of addressing non-easily accessible forms of trauma that millions of Arabs still experience.

As one of the most traumatic events in the modern history of the Arab World, the impact of the Palestinian *Nakba* was the topic of several trauma studies. In one article, Anne Rohrbach studies the Playback Theatre in Jenin to examine the cultural tools of resistance in Palestine. She concludes that sharing stories among the Palestinian children is an act of witnessing that has therapeutic effects. For her, the Playback Theatre “offers a chance to name and revisit stories of suffering, loss, and violence and helps to mobilize solidarity and (re-) connect communities” (79). In another article, Rosemary Sayigh maintains that the *Nakba* is a historic catastrophe that Western scholars often marginalize despite “the proliferation of Palestinian suffering since 1948, and ... the absence of rational hope that their suffering will end in a just settlement” (58). This exclusion of Palestinian suffering from what she calls “trauma genre” reflects a denial of Palestinian claims to justice in world politics and weakens the efforts to reach fair resolutions. Sayigh adds that in the few cases where Western scholars mention Palestinians in the trauma genre, they misrepresented and dehistoricized their trauma (55). Examining the representations of Palestinian trauma in a few foundational texts published by elite Western university presses, Sayigh concludes that: “First, Palestinians are always paired with Israelis, never presented as independently linked to Palestine. Second, there is no reference to power asymmetry and Israeli military occupation. Third and most crucially, history in general, and the *Nakba* in particular, is excised by scholars” (56). While trauma studies undergo censorship in the Arab World, the Palestinian cause seems to experience similar circumstances in Western scholarships.

Along with the factors discussed above, David Morris' concept of moral communities is helpful to explain other aspects of the relative exclusion of Arab trauma from Western studies. Proposing to create a discourse that transforms the pain and depression from an individual concern to a shared suffering among wider communities, Morris explains that literature uses a language that shapes the collective classification of people's experiences as suffering or not. He states that:

We do not acknowledge the destruction of beings outside our moral community as suffering; we detach ourselves from their pain as if it were an incomprehensible behavior encountered on some Swiftian island. Within a moral community, we employ names like martyr or hero and inscribe the suffering of our own people within narratives of hallowed sacrifice and epic achievement. (40)

Morris maintains that suffering is a social status that can be given or not depending on who suffers. He gives an example of this hierarchy by referring to the Iraqi victim, who does not belong to the Western moral community, and the American perpetrator, who is part of it. He says: "An Iraqi truck driver in the Persian Gulf War can die in a firestorm of laser guided missiles, and the incident will play on American television as proof of superior United States technology" (40). While the Western discourse shows a little tendency to include Arab suffering in the trauma genre, this lack of recognition reflects a broader cultural and political marginalization in world politics.

The Syrian philosopher and the translator of many of Freud's works, Jurj Ṭarābīshī is one of the few Arabic writers who offered extensive analysis of the Arab thought during the post 1967 war. In his book, *al-Muthaqqafūn al-'Arab wa-l-Turāth (Arab Intellectuals and Tradition)*, he identifies the defeat as a traumatic event for all Arabs, especially the

intellectuals. He lists several symptoms of *ṣadmah* (trauma) that Arab intellectuals suffer due to the war, including a rejection of the world development and avoidance of interacting with it; an understanding of history in terms of impersonal forces rather than personal agencies; a reinforcement of ego-centrality to compensate for the wound of the successive failures; and the use of symbolic sexual terms to refer to historical events such as “rape of Palestine” instead of the “occupation of Palestine” (31-61).<sup>10</sup> Ṭarābīshī believes that the historical trauma of the Arab intellectuals is healable if they interact actively with the world and stop resorting only to their exceptional past. This early therapeutic characterization of the post 1967 war generation corresponds with later non-melancholic views on trauma, particularly LaCapra’s concept of “working through.”

While there is a real shortage of non-literary sources that deal with trauma in the Arab World, modern Arabic literature gave rise to a significant number of writers who took trauma as a major theme in their works. Consider for example, Eliās khori, Aḥmad al-Marzūki, Maḥmūd Darwīsh, just to name a few, who wrote extensively on such traumatic experiences in the Arab world as the Lebanon’s civil war, torture in Moroccan prisons, and the Palestinian *Nakba* of 1948. Many Arab writers did not necessarily read about trauma, but they lived traumatic experiences and wrote about them probably in a subconscious way. For instance, many of Ghassān Kanafānī’s fictional works on trauma were based on a real traumatic experience he lived, namely the *Nakba*. In his works, the image of water, which often represents life and hope in modern Arabic literature, refers to displacement, death, or a catastrophe. This negative image of water is probably based on a real childhood traumatic

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<sup>10</sup> In his reference to the Arab’s ego-centrality, Ṭarābīshī explains that Arab intellectuals consider their culture as superior but victim, and they view themselves as the center of victimhood.



memory, when he was forced to leave his homeland through the sea. The Arabic literary production fills a gap left by the lack of critical studies and records the trauma of Arabs during very crucial moments in their modern history.

In “The Traumatic Subjectivity of Ṣun‘ Allāh Ibrāhīm’s *Dhāt*,” Yoav Di-Capua uses trauma theory to discuss the “crisis of historical consciousness” in the Arab World after the 1967 war. He explains that trauma does not “simply mean a catastrophe or a disaster but a concrete mental situation meriting close attention” (82). Di-Capua defines trauma as “a very complex, intricate and elusive condition,” but he only focuses on “one central aspect of traumatic being, namely, the intersection where temporality, narrativity (the possibility of ‘knowing’ and the ability to tell), and history meet” (82). He maintains that *Dhāt* and other post 1967 Arabic fictions reflect cumulative traumatic conditions that go beyond the event-based model of trauma:

Notably, this condition is not necessarily the outcome of a single historical event such as the 1967 war, but, rather, and more importantly, the ongoing trauma of the everyday: of struggling in poverty; of experiencing political coercion and state apathy; of living under a rigid patriarchal order; and of the daily effort to get by and survive. (83)

Hence, the “crisis of historical consciousness” that produced a broken connection to the Arabs’ past was not only an outcome of colonialism, but it is a result of the efforts of totalitarian regimes to erase the memories of the 1967 defeat and suppress the voices of the oppositions (81). This situation resulted in a collective trauma and an historical crisis.

Many Arab regimes are notorious for their use of torture as a tool of interrogation against political opponents, violating human rights in the name of national security. Under

authoritarian regimes that fear to lose power, the few decades that preceded the Arab Spring had witnessed an unprecedented increase in the severity, magnitude, and the scope of torture. This massive use of torture created a sense of terror among civilians and deeply damaged the social fabric of Arab societies. Those governments usually make it impossible for scholars to document these human right violations and threaten to punish activists. Therefore, the covered story is often heard when those activists flee their countries or after these regimes collapse. In his memoir, *Tazmamārt, al-Zinzānah Raqm 10 (Tazmamart: Cell No. 10)*, the former Moroccan military officer, Aḥmad al-Marzūki, narrates his story as a prisoner in a secret prison in Morocco. After a failed military coup, al-Marzūki spends eighteen years in the prison. His memoir reveals some secrets about the torture methods used in that detention center. In *Khams Daqā'iq wa-Hasab!: Tiṣ Sanawāt Fī Sujūn Sūrīyah* “Just Five Minutes Nine Years in The Prisons of Syria”, Hibah Dabbāgh tells her tragedy as a prisoner in the Assad regime’s prisons. The story begins when the Syrian intelligent agents break into her apartment asking her to come for “five minutes” of interrogation, but the few minutes turn up into nine years of torture in Syrian jails, where thousands of civilians suffer similar experiences without any charges.

In a related topic, the American foreign policy in the Arab World is widely viewed as a main source of trauma in the region. The U.S support of inhumane acts of torture encourages Arab regimes to increase the scope of their violations. The 2004 scandal of Abū Ghurayb prison in Iraq gives a glimpse on the enormity of torture practiced by the United States in Arab countries (see fig. 1.1.). According to Pierre Krähenbühl, the Operations Director for the International Committee of the Red Cross, the US forces used torture in a systematic way in Iraq: “We were dealing here with a broad pattern, not individual acts.

There was a pattern and a system” (qtd. In Stich 258). Guantánamo Bay camp is another notorious center run by the US government, where torture practiced against large numbers of detainees, many of them were deported from Arab countries jails. In his memoir, *Guantánamo Diary*, the Mauritanian former detainee, Muḥammadu Ṣalāḥi, writes about the trauma of his detention at Guantánamo for over fourteen years without charge. Writing his memoir in English, which he learned during his years in the detention, Ṣalāḥi offers a historical document on the everyday life in the camp, describing his imprisonment journey which included Mauritania, Jordan, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo.



Fig.1.1. An Iraqi prisoner in Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad forced to stand on a box and threatened if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted (Seymour).

In *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma, and Memory in Iraqi Culture*, a rich volume with a wide-ranging scope, Stephan Milich et al, discuss the literary production in Iraq from 1980 to 2010. Much of this volume deals with the traumatic consequences of violence in the modern history of Iraq. Since large numbers of Iraqis live outside their home country, the authors address how this dichotomy shapes the literary production. Criticizing the literary works in Iraq during the Baathist rule as it was employed to serve politics, Leslie Tramontini examines this ethical issue by asking: “Can a text written by someone who not only contributed to the repressive system but actively shaped it and drew personal advantage out of it, be viewed primarily as a text, without considering the author?” (Milich et al. 26). Since the successive traumatic events heavily impacted the social identity of the Iraqis, the responses to these memories were conflicting. The multiplicity of topics reflects such a diversity, enriching the debates on how to understand a complex history of trauma that has not been represented consistently.

A small but growing number of studies in Arabic and English have been published after the Arab Spring. For instance, in her seminal book, *Dhakirat al-qahr* (*Memory of Suppression*), ‘Abd al-‘Aziz provides a brief history of torture from ancient times till the present day. She examines the relationship between the perpetrator of trauma (*aljalād*) and the victim (*alḍahia*) and describes the torture methods used by authorities to subjugate people. She explains that totalitarian regimes often bring psychological experts to help them subjugate the oppositions:

Psychiatry was (and is still today) one of the tools of repression adopted by the despotic authority whenever it searched for an additional trick that guarantees for it a mental and physical control over its oppositions. It even adopts psychiatry to

stigmatize them with an everlasting madness, which they cannot escape even after being released. Some specialist doctors get involved in this process, [a horrible situation] that made psychiatric hospitals in some eras the synonym of political detention centers and prisons, or perhaps worse and deeper in influence. (my translation, 118)

Hence, the process of torture is a systematic strategy that relies on different pillars and the individual *jalād* who commits an act of torture against a powerless *dahia* is just one person in a long chain of perpetrators who try to devastate their opponents physically and psychologically. Without the consent of the top of the regimes, these acts cannot happen in that systematic way.

In *Anxiety of Erasure*, Hanādi al-Sammān uses a feminist approach to examine what she considers a transgenerational trauma of modern diasporic Arab women. She relies on two tropes from classical Arabic traditions: the figure of Shahrazad from *One Thousand and One Nights* and *al-maw'udah* from pre-Islamic Arabian traditions.<sup>11</sup> She argues that the image of both figures still haunts both Muslim and Christian Arab women in their writings: “They materialize Shahrazad’s literary erasure and the historical nightmare of wa’d in their narratives, thereby brining these traumas to the surface and using them as a distant memory that propels the writing of their literature and inspires, above all, their survival” (12). Al-Sammān maintains that these tropes represent a transgenerational trauma that inflicts Arab females for centuries. However, the process of resurrecting these tropes by modern writers serves as a therapy for it helps Arab women to reclaim their history and deconstruct the

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<sup>11</sup> *Al-maw'udah* is a word used to describe the female infant who is buried alive in pre-Islamic rituals, an ancient Arabian tradition came to an end with the emergence of Islam. The Qur’ān condemns this practice in “Sūrat at-Takwīr”: “When the baby girl buried alive is asked/ for what sin she was killed” (*Qur’ān*, 81:9-10).

attempts to debilitate their role: “early diasporic women writers have internalized the trauma of Shahrazad’s and al-maw’udah’s erasure on an intergenerational level, and have, as a result, established certain landmarks for their successors to follow on the road to female literary self-assertion and resurrection” (16). Unlike the views that consider trauma as an inaccessible and irretrievable experience, al-Sammān claims that “through the process of intergenerational insidious trauma, the reenactments of the wa’d trauma in diasporic women’s literature do, indeed, make the traumatic event more ‘accessible,’ thus engendering a corporality that allows healing and an understanding of the traumatic past” (14).

### **Conclusion**

To better comprehend trauma and benefit from its critical tools, it is necessary, as Luckhurst suggests, to be acquainted with the development of the concept since its inception in the late nineteenth century to the present. The brief history offered in this chapter shows the complexity of trauma as a concept as well the development and changes it underwent. Over the last two centuries, medical, military, and literary debates have shaped the public understanding of trauma as a concept or theory. Before the first World War, the concept was molded by a medical controversy that centered around the question of whether the cause of trauma was physical, psychological or both. During and after World War I, military developments gave rise to several terms and created an urgency to better understand the consequences of trauma. The huge numbers of casualties and the horrible scenes of dead and wounded soldiers compelled many governments to deal with the economic, legal, and political dimensions of trauma.

In the 1990s, Caruth was the first scholar to use the term “trauma theory,” and her publications were crucial to turn trauma into a new theory. While most scholars of trauma theory came from a literary background, the political, social, and cultural debates affected their theorization of trauma. Most recently, postcolonial critics joined the debate and focused on literature as a main element in their analysis of trauma. Trauma in the Arab World, in turn, has not yet been fully structured as an independent field due to the limited scholarship and the political repression. While this chapter offers a very short introduction to major debates in trauma studies, other sources such as Ruth Leys’s *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Roger Luckhurst’s *The Trauma Question*, and *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* by Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman have investigated the history of trauma as a concept and theory with great detail.

## CHAPTER 2

### Cultural Trauma and the Allegory of Nation

When the Iraqi regime collapsed in 2003, oppression, totalitarianism, and corruption did not come to an end. With multiple waves of violence, fundamentalism, and human rights abuses, the claims of a new age of liberation and democracy quickly vanished. A bloody decade began under US-supported governments that were widely viewed as fragile, corrupt, and sectarian. The continuous state of war gave rise to resistance groups, insurgents, as well as outlawed militias that filled the power vacuum and began vicious cycles of sectarian clashes. Apart from the physical and psychological losses, a tear in the social fabric appeared, causing a serious threat to divide the country. Egyptians, on the other hand, have been suffering a collective trauma since the 2011 revolution. The physical casualties of the revolution were relatively low compared to the losses in previous traumatic events such as the wars with Israel. However, a national frustration has built up rapidly with a general feeling among the middle and working classes that the hopes for a revolutionary transformation were in vain. Following several economic and political crises, this public resentment was violently suppressed by the last military coup. With a collective feeling of despair and disappointment in Iraq and Egypt, terror fiction comes to the fore, addressing the national failure to deal with serious challenges that threaten their collective identities.

Representing the modern history of Iraq and Egypt as an age of cultural trauma, terror fiction provides a pessimistic perspective that depicts collective damage that is hard to heal. It also portrays a physically destroyed homeland, shattered social relations, and extremely violent emerging political realities. The hope for a real transformation in this literary mode is



often overshadowed by the cumulative past experiences and the harsh realities of the present. This chapter examines the literary representations of cultural trauma in contemporary fiction in Iraq and Egypt. Rather than reading trauma as an individual experience, writers of terror fiction tend to present trauma as a blow to the collective consciousness and the social structures of entire countries. Whereas trauma theory often focuses on the individual's experience, terror fiction embraces a discourse of collective memory through a creative engagement with historical events. Regardless of the claims that some trauma theorists view the traumatic experience as ahistorical and apolitical, Arabic terror fiction emphasizes the importance of history and politics in creating the traumatic experience and reshaping the collective consciousness of nations.

In addition to Jeffrey Alexander's concept of "cultural trauma," which offers a critical lens to analyze a broader socio-political context in which trauma affects the collective structures of nations, Fredrick Jameson's conception of "national allegory" urges us to pay more attention to the allegorical messages in the Arabic terror fiction. Jameson argues that in third-world texts, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (76). Thus, the works of cultural trauma in Arabic fiction are usually written in an allegorical way, and they can be read as representatives of national concerns. They contain symbolic themes and include multiple layers of meanings that can only be understood within their larger socio-political and economic contexts.

This chapter discusses the ways in which such works as 'Alī Badr's *Hāris al-Tabgh* (*The Tobacco Keeper*), Dunā Ghālī's *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* (*Houses of Loneliness*), and Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid* show how the traumatic experiences in the modern Arab World

transcend the individual victims and strike entire societies. By reading these works as national allegories, the cumulative experiences of trauma go beyond the event-based model of trauma on which Alexander based his theory. By recounting the stories of individual victims, Arabic terror fiction seeks to explain that collective trauma affects every single person in the society.

**‘Alī Badr’s *Hāris Al-Tabgh* (*The Tobacco Keeper*): The Crisis of “Murderous Identities”**

*Hāris al-Tabgh* best represents the cultural trauma that Iraqis lived from World War II through the American occupation of Baghdad. The novel starts when *US Today News* contacts the narrator and asks him to travel to Baghdad to write an article about the Iraqi composer Kamāl Midḥat, who has been found dead one month after being kidnapped by an armed group near his home in the Iraqi capital. However, as a ghost-writer, the narrator’s name will not appear in the report and the essay will only be attributed to a senior correspondent named John Barr: “This is termed ghost-writing or shadowing, in which a reporter travels to a danger zone to write about a hot topic but whose report is attributed to one of the paper’s big shots. The local reporter gets a fee for his trouble and nothing else” (4). After the newspaper covers all the expenses and travels, the narrator interviews some of Kamāl’s acquaintances and visits Baghdad, Damascus, and Tehran, where the dead composer lived. To unravel the secrets of Kamāl’s life, the narrator initially relies on the letters and documents that the newspaper supplies. With three identities, the life of the dead composer proves to be a very complicated puzzle that the narrator fails to completely solve.

Because the life of Kamāl parallels the modern history of Iraq, the narrator begins the narrative by devising a brief history of the country from the 1920s until the US occupation of Baghdad. For instance, in 1926, the year of the protagonist's birth, the Iraqi-British treaty was signed. It is also the same year the great poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and the renowned novelist Fu'ād al-Tikerly were born. Similarly, many other incidents in the hero's life coincide with major historical events that the biography lists. The novel views the religious divisions in modern Iraq as the main source of trauma. While the religious persecution began in the 1940s when the Jewish community of Baghdad was attacked, successive governments suppressed the Shiite population and most recently the Sunnis. During the narrator's stay in Al-Manṣūr area, numerous factions fight to control Baghdad and many victims die, but no one understands who is fighting whom and why civilians are being murdered. Fleeing the country before solving the mystery of Kamāl's death, the narrator admits that comprehending the nature of the conflict in Baghdad is as perplexing as the mystery of Kamāl's life. The author documents many actual historical events from the modern history of Iraq, but he remains loyal to his fictional style, writing a subtle novel that addresses the sense and sensibility of his contemporary readers.

Although the modern history of Iraq has witnessed variety of socio-economic, ethnic, and political conflicts, *Hāris al-Tabgh* mostly focuses on the murderous aspects of the religious diversity in the country. Examples of ethnic persecution such as the long-running Kurdish conflict are barely mentioned in the novel, and lesser known religious and ideological-driven clashes like the Farhūd Incident of 1941 dominate most of the narrative. For the narrator, limiting the Iraqi identity to its religious aspects produces what the Lebanese French intellectual Amīn Ma'lūf's calls *Les identités meurtrières* (*Murderous*

*Identities*). These murderous identities justify the oppression of other Iraqis who have other religious affiliations. Consequently, the protagonist appears in three different names and identities that incorporate three different religious groups, as well as three phases in the modern history of Iraq. Kamāl Midḥat appears as a complex character who represents the trauma of the Jews, Shiites, and Sunnis in Baghdad. As a victim with three identities, Kamāl himself is a national allegory employed to expose the injustice committed against the victims of religious persecution in Iraq.

From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator introduces collective Iraqi identity as the product of a series of traumatic events. In a brief historical biography that introduces the protagonist's life stages from birth to death, the narrator writes a list of major events that have shaped the postcolonial history of his home country and instilled a feeling of instability in its people: "Before travelling to Baghdad, I'd already collected a great deal of detailed information about his life. And before starting to write his biography, ... I devised this biography" (8). The list begins with the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941, and it includes other uprisings such as the Farhūd Incident and three military coups in 1958, 1963, and 1968. With the rise of the Baathist party, a new age of trauma begins, culminating with three successive wars: the Iran–Iraq War (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1990-1991), and the US Invasion of Iraq (2003). Along with these historical events, which form Iraqi identity as well as the consciousness of the protagonist, the narrator lists a few major regional events such as the Arab-Israeli wars to show that the cultural trauma of Iraq is part of a broader collective Arab setback. While trauma theory tends to de-historicize and depoliticize traumatic experiences, the biography that *Ḥāris al-Tabgh* begins with introduces a model of cumulative trauma that connects history, politics, and the traumatic experience.

During the postcolonial era, the new political elites used Western-imported slogans to suppress the religious diversity of the country and to secure their authority. Seeking to create murderous identities to divide and control the Iraqis, the new leaders find in Nazism a source of inspiration. Describing the impact of Nazi propaganda on the Jews of Baghdad, the narrator maintains that the beautiful past of the family is “replaced by the news of Hitler’s victories and the voice of the Iraqi Yūnnis Baḥri, whose ‘Hail to the Arabs’, broadcast on the Nazi radio from the Italian city of Bari, incited the people against the Jews” (118). The postcolonial struggle for power shatters the social fabric of the civilians who start to define their identities based on their ethno-religious differences rather than criteria of equal citizenship. Powerless minorities, such as the Jews of Baghdad, are severely impacted by these emergent murderous identities, and consequently they are brutally persecuted for their different religious beliefs. Since the Farhūd Incident, “which followed the rise of the Nazi organizations in Iraq and which saw the death of hundreds of Jewish victims in Baghdad” (117), the Iraqi trauma has not stopped.

*Hāris al-Tabgh* introduces the Farhūd Incident as the first crucial event in postcolonial Baghdadi memory. Although it is excluded from the political debates in Iraq and eliminated from books of history: “Historians have devoted little attention to it and have done nothing to address our collective amnesia” (117), the long-term consequences of the event prove to be more severe than expected. The tragic incident paves the way for a chaotic nation, where people begin to become targets for their religious differences: “[The Farhūd] can be described as a real turning point in the history of this society, being the first attack of its kind against its own citizens, and opening the door to a civil conflict” (117). The narrator maintains that “all subsequent civil strife in Baghdad may be traced back to what happened

on that fateful day in 1941” (117). The Farhūd has not only inflicted damage on a small community of Baghdadi Jews, but it has “changed everyone in Baghdad” (117). It also threatened the religious identity of the protagonist’s family as it “instilled terror and humiliation in Yūsif’s heart and marked the end of the family’s evening rituals” (118). While the novel documents minute details from the very beginnings of the struggle, the novel shows how the accumulation of these seemingly minor incidents had long-term destructive consequences for the entire city of Baghdad.

The narrator also describes the Farhūd in detail to show the indelible impact of that tragic event on the life of his protagonist. Yūsif Sāmi Sālih, the original name of the hero, survives the physical damage of that incident, but his severe mental wound forces him to live in a state of constant fear and trauma. Despite coming from a modest family, Yūsif lives a relatively happy childhood: “In his letters, Yūsif penned a lovely portrait of his childhood in spite of the poverty of the family” (103). However, the protagonist’s trauma began one day when “[s]uddenly he heard a high-pitched scream. ... Then there was another scream from next door” (119). After that, “Yūsif saw the fire starting in the house opposite, ... Yūsif watched the crowds running in the pale and hazy light and heard the house screams of Jews suffocating and dying, ... He saw men brandishing swords and knives as they ran after Şabreya” (119-20). Watching the terrifying incident, the most disturbing memory that Yūsif never forgets is “the burning of Rabbi Shmuel’s books and the burning of his aunt” (120). Since this horrible morning, trauma breaks through Yūsif’s psyche, bringing a feeling of fear that “never entirely left [his] heart” (123). Indeed, Yūsif loses his sense of safety forever as his nation loses its innocence.

*Ḥāris al-Tabgh* records different signs of trauma that the protagonist suffers from since the Farhūd Incident till the last moments of his life. The loss of confidence and lack of self-esteem appear soon after the Farhūd. The lack of self-esteem and the stigma they feel manifest themselves among the Jewish Baghdadi citizens and become part of their identity as they begin to feel they belong to an oppressed minority. Lisa McCann and Laurie Anne Pearlman maintain that when people fall victim to trauma, the impact may manifest itself as a loss of self-esteem, but the degree of this influence depends on the ability of the survivor to adapt to the surrounding conditions (74). Some common impacts of trauma may include destructive feelings and reactionary acts: “common psychological effects of damage to self-esteem are depression, self-destructive thoughts or actions, guilt, shame, self-blame, substance abuse, and, sometimes, dissociative reactions” (76). The responses to these effects may also include “bitterness and anger toward people, withdrawal from others, and isolation” (76). Despite his great ability to adapt to a hostile environment, the protagonist still feels that people watch him and all his movements. Therefore, he “he had to walk proudly and steadily to avoid being regarded as a cowardly Jew” (Badr 113).

Before the Farhūd, Yūsif had happy dreams about the “naked body” of Glady, a girl he loved in his childhood (118). However, after the massacre, Glady’s images were replaced by horrible people: “He began to see figures that seemed to come out a Breughel or Bosch painting, with huge noses, deformed bodies, frightening smiles and cloven feet” (118). In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman explains that the symptoms of traumatic fear can be classified into three categories: “These are called ‘hyperarousal,’ ‘intrusion,’ and ‘constriction.’ Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger, intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; construction reflects the numbing response of

surrender” (35). She adds that in the intrusion category, the traumatic symptoms come “spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). The intrusion category of trauma disrupts the sleeping of the protagonist even several decades after the Farhūd: “Kamāl Midḥat would often wake up screaming. Two or three times a week he was seized by nightmares” (Badr 279). Kamāl writes to his first wife, Farīda: “Here I am at fifty, and until now I’m as scared as I was at ten, or even twenty. How old should I be to be able to sleep without nightmares, tears or fear?” (280). The memories of the happy days disappear, and the misery of trauma sneaks into Kamāl’s dreams, disrupting his life forever.

Herman’s “hyperarousal category” of traumatic fear continues to break into the protagonist’s consciousness. This fear manifests itself clearly when Ḥaydar, the second name of the protagonist, sees the mobs: “He feared the masses and regarded them as a source of danger. He was overwhelmed with apprehension every time he saw their faces and bodies moving with a uniformity that obliterated individual distinctions” (174). Even in Iran, where he does not have enemies, Ḥaydar “felt a considerable hostility towards the mob, the masses and the populace in general” (172). The narrative includes more instances of this endless fear: “something in them inspired fear in his heart and made him tremble. He was scared of the mob and tried to keep as far away from them as possible” (201). The narrator also identifies the potential root of this trauma: “Perhaps the Farhūd was the reason, when he’d seen the same ecstasy in the eyes of the mob, the ecstasy of sacrificial offerings, which turned individuals into a herd in a state of exhilaration” (201). Once more, the Farhūd haunts the hero even when he changes his name and identity. The protagonist suffers from the masses when he is Jewish and continues to fear them when he adopts a Shiite identity.



Similar to the misfortune that the protagonist experiences as result of the imported hatred against the Jews, the Shiite Ḥaydar becomes a victim of the war between Iraq and Iran. After leaving Israel, Yūsif uses the name Ḥaydar Salmān and lives in Tehran as a Shiite. Ḥaydar's return to Baghdad after the overthrow of the monarchy does not end his past traumatic fear, but it increases the feelings of terror that used to disrupt his life. While Ḥaydar's new Muslim identity gives him a temporary feeling of stability: "His life was no longer as unsettled as it had been" (169), this state ends one day when the Iraqi government decides to expel "Iranian subjects" from Iraq. Similar to his first identity when he falls victim to hostility against the Jewish people, Ḥaydar and his family become new targets for the Iraqi government which expels the Shiites who are affiliated with the Iranian authorities. Powerless that he cannot help his dying wife, Ḥaydar feels that human beings are "the only creatures on earth with the capacity to torture their fellow creatures and destroy themselves" (213). It is ironic that the displaced people, who are wrongly accused of being agents for the Iranians "could hardly locate Iran on the map" (213). Ḥaydar succeeds in establishing a new identity, but he again becomes a victim to the murderous identities established by Iraqi governments.

The protagonist's third identity undergoes similar symptoms of trauma. Kamāl's fortune does not change after he returns to Baghdad with a Sunni Muslim identity. He witnesses the overthrow of the former regime and the exclusion of the Sunnis from the power. When he receives a death threat from an unknown armed group, Kamāl has already been suffering a sleep disorder and insomnia: "His frizzy hair seemed ashen and his bones were fragile with premature ageing. He still felt unsteady because of the insomnia" (323). The inability to sleep here is not because of Kamāl's fear of death as he expresses his

willingness to die in more than one occasion: “He didn’t fear death, but considered it a kind of flight into the unknown” (258). Once more, the protagonist’s religious identity leads to another misfortune. Under sectarian rule, innocent civilians become victims for their religious difference. The eighty-year-old Kamāl loses his life, but his death represents the doom of tolerance, diversity, and humane principles. Kamāl’s death frees him from the psychological torture he experienced throughout his life, but it also reveals how Baghdad has become a prisoner of its murderous sectarian identities.

While the narrator employs the different personalities of his protagonist as a national allegory, the appearance of the hero’s sons shows how murderous identities shape the current political realities in Iraq. With the US occupation of their home country, Kamāl’s three sons, who are born to different wives, return to Baghdad bearing different ideologies: “Meir came back with the US forces, bearing ideas of democracy and change; Hussein returned from Tehran with the Islamic Shia movement, feeling happy to be back after a forced exile; ‘Omar came from Egypt, bearing measureless anger and spite at the Sunni’s loss of power” (301). The son’s return does not lead to unification, but instead furthers the rift in the body of that shattered family. Although people try to downplay the influence of this rift, it is reflected in the entire country: “The social rift was crystal clear. Kamāl Midḥat found the split reflected in the whole society, not excluding artists. Although people in general tried to downplay the significance of the division, they tacitly reinforced it” (304). While the change of regime brings hope for a new future, it leads to a more socially divided community where even brothers can be enemies.

The murder of Kamāl at the end of novel increases the mystery of the protagonist’s life and death. The documents, letters, and interviews that the narrator uses do not help him

answer the questions of: “Who killed Kamāl Midḥat? Why? And how?” (312). The reports say that “Kamāl had been kidnapped from near the post office in Al-Mansūr” (312), but the shortage of information about the crime itself made the narrator feel as if he is “only moving towards a mysterious void” (312). The narrator’s lack of success in solving the mystery of Kamāl’s life and death is similar to his failure to understand the nature of the conflict and its disastrous consequences on the entire nation:

Speaking about Kamāl Midḥat was like coloured smears on a white wall or a bell ringing to remind us that we had fallen into a bottomless pit. It was like going on a long journey on a war train full of skulls and screaming black masks. It was like arriving in our country for the first time and finding it overrun by black dread and boundless anarchy. (312)

The narrator realizes that he will not come to a clear conclusion regarding the mystery of Kamāl’s murder and the enigma of Baghdad’s destruction. However, he understands that “the killings only succeeded in eroding our feeble national memory” (327), and the national disaster was more profound than what he had already expected.

The reactions to trauma that the protagonist of *Hāris al-Tabgh* shows are contradictory and unsystematic as he represents different identities and historical phases in modern Iraq. Although common responses to trauma may include fear, bitterness, anger, and withdrawal from society, the protagonist’s reactions are not always expected as he succeeds in numbing his feelings on many occasions. When Ḥaydar’s wife, Ṭāhira, dies during their journey to Iran after the Iraqi government expels them, he does not “shed a single tear” and he expresses no anger toward that injustice. However, the protagonist shows signs of isolation in an earlier stage in his life. For instance, after the Farhūd, Yūsif’s withdraws from

other people: “he wished he could hide away in a deep, empty well. ... when he went out walking, he would look the other way, avoiding all eye contact” (123). This social withdrawal lasts for long decades until “Amjad Muṣṭafā and his wife Widād ... took Kamāl Midḥat out of his solitude” (259). In *Hāris al-Tabgh*, the symptoms of trauma represent a national wound that increases or decreases depending on the severity of political changes.

Kamāl’s solitude has its parallel in the national and religious traditions. The narrator says: “The dominant romantic idea was that Iraq acquired its identity from its tragic fate as a country located at the extreme edge of the map ... and as a country deprived of access to the sea. ... Iraq was like Joseph among his brothers” (287). The location of Iraq at the edge of the Arab World casts it as a victim and a hero at the same time. Historically, Iraq is often the first Arab country to confront foreign invasions and to sacrifice its sons (and daughters) to protect the Arab World. By fulfilling this responsibility, Iraq is viewed as the guard of the eastern gate of the Arabs. However, this heroic fate also causes other Arab nations to feel envy in a way similar to the feelings of Jacob’s sons toward their brother Joseph. Comparing Kamāl’s solitude to Iraq’s isolation or the prophet Joseph’s loneliness among his brothers dramatizes the tragedy of the protagonist and gives it more national and religious dimensions.

The lack of social communication that the protagonist shows is also reflected in the protagonist’s constant silence and unwillingness to react against his personal tragedies. The desire not to speak is a common symptom of trauma that many survivors experience.

According to Dori Laub,

The speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to – and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for

them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To not return from this silence is rule rather than exception. (Felman and Laub 58)

The novel is replete with many instances in which the protagonist fails to speak about his trauma. For instance, soon after the Farhūd, Yūsif remembered the incident, but “he couldn’t utter a word ... He would try hard to collect his courage but could only stutter, his power of speech gone” (Badr 123). In his second identity, Ḥaydar showed an inability to speak after Ṭāhira’s death: “He didn’t say a word or open his mouth, only stared at the others” (214). Even during his adoption of Sunni identity, Kamāl did not tell Nādia about his nightmares: “he opened his eyes and looked at Nādia with his eyes flashing. He then fell into a mysterious silence” (279). Remaining silent seems a compulsory exile that the protagonist undergoes to protect himself from the haunting memories of his painful past and personal defeats.

Despite these traumas, *Ḥāris al-Tabgh* includes many instances that deal with the possibility of healing. In one scene, the protagonist attempts to use music as a remedy for the cultural trauma that his people suffer: “He wanted his music to mould people and push them forward” (173). This endeavor seems to be a continuation to other artistic and literary movements that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s and aimed at reducing the socio-political hegemony imposed by the ruling elites in Iraq. As the narrator tells, the Iraqi poets Nāzik al-Malā’ikah and Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb made a sharp departure from the rigid strictures of classical Arabic poetry and initiated the “free verse poetry” in 1947. Those young poets and others used their literary and artistic skills to form a new Iraqi identity based on freedom, tolerance, diversity, and anticolonialism. The free verse poets enriched the Iraqi literary scene, but their voices could not change the political hegemony of post-independence

governments. Comparably, Ḥaydar tries to use music to heal himself and his people: “Music was able to unite people, to urge them to work hard and respond to the instinctive beauty within their souls. He believed that it was for art to eradicate ugliness and introduce beauty to the world” (178). More importantly, Ḥaydar thinks that “[m]usic liberates [him] from fear and takes [him] to the mysterious and obscure recesses of life” (198). However, the novel shows that Iraq’s trauma not only needs progress in literature and art but a real revolution against all forms of religious and political injustice.

When music fails to be a remedy for his psychological wound, Kamāl starts to think about death as the last resort. Kamāl’s obsession with death is another sign of trauma that afflicts survivors with severe psychological damages. In *Hidden Scar*, Vito Zepinic maintains that some patients with extreme psychological wounds suffer a “self-inflicted act of willingness to die that has intentional death as its intended purpose” (140). Those patients usually have “a range of thoughts, from the idea that death would be welcome to the immediate intent to kill [themselves]” (140). In these severe cases, Zepinic contends, “suicidality is seen as an escape from a long process that involves all kind of losses” (142). For Zepinic, the loss of identity is one of the motives that cause traumatized people to think about committing suicide (143). Feeling a loss of identity, Kamāl starts to appreciate death because: “Death might destroy the wall that stood between him and his self” (Badr 258). As a trauma victim, the hero of *Ḥāris al-Tabgh* expresses his obsession with death on a few occasions in his life.

An example of that obsession with death happened one winter, when the protagonist was melancholic as he felt that Baghdad itself was sad. This sadness was connected to his feeling of loneliness and loss of identity. This feeling increased to the degree that Kamāl

desired death: “The mystical feelings that dominated Kamāl’s mind at that time were linked with the mysterious death wish within him. . . . Death might perhaps free him, too, from the persistent images and nightmarish visions that had haunted his dreams and tortured him ever since the Farhūd” (258). When the Allied forces bombed Baghdad in 1991, Kamāl was overwhelmed with a feeling of “lethal despair and apathy, for he could do nothing except read the papers and listen to the radio carrying political statements” (287). This feeling increased as Kamāl wished he could leave this world: “Primitive instincts bared their teeth and life lost its taste. My sole ambition was to die in peace” (288). This desire to die accompanied Kamāl until his assassination at the end of the novel. In his last letter to Farīda, Kamāl again expresses his wish to die: “why can’t death be the tobacco keeper? I don’t regard death as awful, but see him as an elegant gentleman. I will embrace him and call him brother” (305). Indeed, the victory of death over music in Kamāl’s story is an allegorical triumph of the murderous identities, which had demolished the national dreams for a better Iraq and divided its citizens.

### **Family Breakdown in Dunā Ghālī’s *Manāzil Al-Waḥshah* (*Houses of Loneliness*)**

Iraqi fiction often presents the trauma of Iraq after 2003 as an accumulation of long decades of corruption, dictatorship, war, and other forms of political injustice. It depicts family relations as a fabric that is gradually ripped because of a series of national setbacks. Building on a historicizing tendency, *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* focuses on life in Baghdad between the years 2006 and 2008. The author, Dunā Ghālī, a psychiatrist who is aware of the social impacts of trauma on victims, portrays the horror that families experienced during the

US occupation of Baghdad. Unlike *Hāris al-Tabgh*, which focuses on the murderous identities in Iraq and the fragmentation of the nation due to religious driven clashes, *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* depicts social life after the collapse of the Baathist regime. For the mother, who is also the main narrator, Baghdad turns into a place of horror and loneliness. The severity of the clashes outside the home is reflected in the relationships between the family members. As the basic unit in the social structure of the country, the Iraqi family is severely traumatized in the novel like the nation itself.

*Manāzil al-Waḥshah* narrates the traumatic story of a Baghdadi family forced to live horrible years in their home after the American invasion of Iraq. Due to the violence in the city, the family members confine themselves in their big house and leave only when necessary. Apart from the violence outside, the mother describes the tragedies of her son, who is psychologically sick, and her husband, who fails to fulfill his social responsibility toward his family. All family members show different symptoms of trauma and they struggle to live normally. The novel ends when the son divorces his new wife and the mother finds out that her husband had betrayed her in the past with another woman. Ghālī does not refer to the ethnicity or sect of her characters to avoid limiting the trauma to a specific racial or religious group. She generalizes traumatic experience in the novel and addresses collective concerns. The names of characters are used ironically in the novel and their holders often act oppositely. For instance, the meaning of Salwān, the son's name, is solace, but he does not bring any comfort to his mother, who suffers because of his illness. Similarly, the father's name As'ad is derived from happiness, but he appears as a wretched man at his home and at his place of work.



From the beginning of the novel, the first narrator, an unnamed mother, depicts the tragedy of her family members, who remain in their house because of the increasing violence in Baghdad. The mother starts her narrative at the beginning of 2006, three years after the American occupation of Iraq. The novel describes this year as one of the bloodiest times in the Iraqi war, where many forces were fighting to control Baghdad's neighborhoods. The power vacuum and the weakness of the new government led civilians to build fences to protect themselves: "The external fence, after we raised its height, still looks odd to me. What was happening outside seemed unexpected. All the preparations we have made could not help us protect our house" (Ghālī 9).<sup>12</sup> The loss of security and the rise of crime and violence rates in Baghdad affect the health of the son, Salwān, who becomes physically and psychologically sick: "Salwān's health had worsened, and his relapses increased. The odd fact is that these relapses mimicked the rhythm of events outside the house" (9). Salwān's health relapses, which increase when security collapses in Baghdad, demonstrate that his experience is national rather than individual. When Baghdad suffers, Salwān's health worsens as well.

In addition to the trauma of Salwān, the first chapter shows that the parents are traumatized as well. In order to escape the feeling of powerlessness after seeing their son collapsing before their eyes, the mother and father resort to some unhealthy habits like smoking: "His father— like me— finds comfort in his cigarettes, for he is tormented by the idea that we had neglected our only son" (9). Apart from smoking, the mother fights her depression and psychological pain by drinking alcohol. This habit helps her relieve her traumatic experience and serves as an antidote for her melancholy. While the parents stop

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<sup>12</sup> All translations from Dunā Ghālī's *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* are my own.

talking much at home, the mother later develops a habit of not listening to others' advice. In a conversation with her mother, Salwān's mother refuses the grandmother's suggestions to leave the country and join her husband in Jordan. She also rejects other advice to take care of herself and stop drinking: "[My mother] said with a disgusted face that she feels dizzy because of the smell of alcohol, and drinking is the last thing she expects from a polite girl coming from a decent family like me" (70). The traumatized parents hide their feelings of torment that they failed to help their son, but they seek to find relief in addiction. Trying to repress their psychological injury, the parents end up developing a social rift that further divides the family.

The novel sheds light on the lack of social communication among the family members. This negative condition is reflected in their constant silence and unwillingness to speak or react to their personal tragedies. Similar to the protagonist in *Hāris al-Tabgh*, the three major characters in *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* are unable to speak about their trauma. For instance, when the parents realize that their son's health is deteriorating, they choose not to speak about it or negotiate the problem: "We start to avoid talking about our fault of neglecting [Salwān's health], fearing that we might blame one other" (9). The parents think that silence is better than speaking in this situation as it saves them from getting involved in new familial problems that might worsen the health of their son. This silent response to the events resembles the absence of the civilians' voice in Iraqi politics for fear of causing more national clashes and controversy. The traumatized parents are unable to speak due to their shock and to keep the family united, but the Iraqi people remain silent as the political authorities and the sectarian militias often ignore their role or force them not to speak.

Silence seems to be the most common symptom of trauma that all the family members suffer. When the war started in 2003, “Salwān’s psychological state had steadily deteriorated and his health declined particularly after the year 2003. This situation frightened his father and made him flounder, not knowing how to deal with him” (10). Unexpectedly, the shocked father failed to speak to Salwān: “[As ‘ad] lost the ability to communicate with him” (10). Similar to his father, Salwān suffers the same silence issue: “Nothing in him speaks except his withered hazel eyes” (17). Since the son refuses to speak, his mother understands what he needs only by looking at his facial expressions. When the family members gather for eating, Salwān’s presence obliges everyone to remain silent: “He possesses a miraculous capability of making silence strongly present among the three of us. He does not respond or comment” (27). Silence here seems to be a compulsory symptom that prevents the family members from being actively engaged in their relationships and drives them toward loneliness. Since the father and son rarely speak, the big house becomes a house of dreariness, a new condition that exacerbates the mother’s psychological torture: “Constant silence! Suddenly, I see myself on the verge of madness” (19).

The most disturbing symptom of trauma that the family members suffer is fear. The absence of law and the news of violence and crimes committed by the fighting groups oblige people to live in a constant horror. While the hyperarousal symptoms appear on the family members as they have constant expectations of fear, the intrusion category of trauma that Judith Herman explains disrupts the sleeping of Salwān, who frequently wakes up screaming. The mother recounts that Salwān used to dream of “Ghosts, monsters, dinosaurs, and thieves” (32). Terrified by the annoying dreams, Salwān calls his mother at midnight asking for help (32). The mother recounts that:

He told me he used to see the kidnappers [of his father] through his window. He used to see them trying to enter the house. They used to follow us even on our way to the doctor and when we return home. The army, the police, the masked kidnappers wait for him in an ambush, and they want to kill all of us in our beds. (32)

Salwān equates the government with the gangs which kidnapped his father. For him, they all become a source of terror for civilians. The horror that haunts Salwān in his dreams reflects the sense of lost safety that people felt in Baghdad.

The silence and fear that the family members suffer drive them to solitude and outrage. Because of their inability to help their son in his psychological breakdown, the family members confine themselves in their house and do not socialize with others: “Our greatest achievement was in isolating ourselves” (11). For instance, Salwān locks himself to his room; the father resigns from his job and later leaves for Jordan to avoid people; and the mother does not want to visit anyone. When the grandmother comes from Basra to offer help and advice, the mother repels her. In one scene, the grandmother’s attempts to clean the filthy house and remove the dust irritate the mother and leads her to ask the grandmother to stop interfering in her life. The mother says: “I slammed the door forcefully and walked into my room so that I don’t have to listen to her anymore. Our altercation caused my mother to get angry and leave the house despite the curfew” (103). The tendency to isolate themselves and the anger they show perpetuate the trauma of the family members and further divide them.

The mother identifies the American forces as the main reason for Salwān’s relapse. Their lack of consideration and violent policy toward Iraqis increase the tragedy of the civilians. One day, a group of American soldiers break into the house to interrogate Salwān because they suspect him of being “terrorist.” As they enter the house, the soldiers throw

books, break a mirror, and wave their guns at Salwān. Although the mother explains to them that her son is sick, they break into his room, surround him, and forcefully grab him by his clothes. This sudden attack shocks Salwān and worsens his bad health: “Salwān could not bear the situation, started to scream hysterically, and fell” (63-64). The US occupation causes many hardships to the civilians like Salwān, who is transformed from a healthy young man into a helpless patient. Dr. Ḥusām, for instance, tells Salwān’s mother that while her son does not suffer from any physiological ailments, “the state of his health resembles many of those who had been recruited for war and fought in real battles” (12). He adds that ““it is impossible for those who had an experience of this kind to resume sound and normal. ... This is an unfortunate generation”” (12). Salwān’s psychological wound is a personal story, but it represents an entire generation of traumatized Iraqi youths living an age of horror under foreign occupation.

When his parents and doctors fail in treating his psychological wound, the mother describes how death preoccupies Salwān’s thinking. As a desperate young man, Salwān considers death his final resort to overcome the severe psychological damage he experiences. Salwān’s intention to end his life is an example of how many Iraqis start to see death as a means to liberate them from the hardships caused by long years of all kinds of losses. As a trauma victim, Salwān tries to commit suicide twice in the novel: “His first attempt happened after two weeks of As‘ad’s release from abduction and return home” (32). While the mother talks several times about Salwān’s attempts to commit suicide, Salwān does not mention anything about these experiences; he instead talks about his family members and his travel to Jordan when he was teenager. Salwān’s omission of these painful experiences may reflect his willingness to overcome his traumatic past and think about the future.

Despite its sad events, *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* provides an example of recovery from trauma through social practices. The mother traces the changes that take place in her son's health before and after the appearance of Asal, a foreign girl who comes with the grandmother from the city of Basra to visit Salwān's family in Baghdad. The medical procedures that Salwān receives do not have as positive impacts on his health as the social treatment. Before Asal's visit, Salwān leaves university, tries to commit suicide twice, visits many doctors without results, and isolates himself in a small room to avoid contact with anybody. His mother describes his condition thus: "Something has been broken in the psyche of this happy, smart, and eloquent boy, leading him to fall back year after year" (72). However, after Asal stays with them at home, his health conditions improve. He begins gradually to leave his room, communicate with Asal and his mother, and develop positive attitudes toward life. While this social revival is planned by the grandmother, who believes that books and isolation are responsible for Salwān's setback, this plan by the old woman proves to be a useful cure for her grandson's illness. For the first time, Salwān's self-confidence arises and his self-isolation comes to an end. This finally leads Salwān to marry Asal and he travel to Syria without any assistance from his parents. This example shows the importance of such social practices as marriage in treating trauma survivors.

The social trauma in *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* can also be regarded as a cultural trauma as it allegorically represents the collective tragedy of Iraq after the American invasion of 2003. The writer does not limit the story to her fictional events, but also includes many real images and incidents in Baghdad during the years of occupation. The personal experiences of characters go hand in hand with the collective predicament of the Iraqi civilians. While Ghālī describes the defeated father, the desperate son, and the powerless mother, she also depicts

her torn city in a graphic way: “Baghdad is like a slaughtered animal with intestines taken out” (46). Ghālī also changes her narrator, Salwan’s mother, and gives the son a chapter to narrate in order to show different generational perspectives. This shift in perspective provides a completely different reason for Salwān’s trauma. Salwān attributes his trauma to an old experience that has nothing to do with the war; his trauma begins after he experiences a sexual assault in his childhood. Regardless of the allegorical connotations of each version, the contradictory narratives reinforce Cathy Caruth’s argument that trauma is beyond representation and it is difficult to comprehend.

The novel is replete with different literary techniques of flashbacks, symbolic names, allegorical figures, contradictory narratives, and fragmentary images. Ghālī uses these strategies to show that the severe trauma of her characters resembles the complicated situation in Iraq. The profound psychological damage of the family members and their inability to adapt with the new socio-political changes transform them from normal cheerful individuals into silent vanquished members who lose their hope in the future and withdraw from social life. At the end, the father leaves for Jordan and fails to find a better life; Salwān travels with his new wife to Syria, but they shortly thereafter divorce; and the mother remains alone in her house in Baghdad to witness how the frightened Baghdadi citizens desert their city to live in faraway places of exile. The migration of family members refers to the fragmentation of the Iraqi people in different countries after the war. As an allegory of the homeland, the mother stays in Baghdad. However, she finds one of her husband’s diaries and reads his confessions about an affair with her neighbor. This surprising end embodies a metaphorical criticism against the political elite who falsely claims that they have been

suppressed in Iraq, but when they leave the country their scandalous past and their pursuit of material gains come to surface.

### **Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid*: A Portrayal of a Hellish City**

The idea that a homeland turns into a living hell for its residents is a recurrent theme in Arabic terror fiction. In this motif, entire populations experience collective suffering and feel an impossibility of escaping from the status quo regardless of what they do. This collective trauma shapes the mode of people in a pessimistic way that defies realistic expectations. Losing hope of change, people resort to temporary ways of relief such as sex, addiction, and violence. Realizing the insignificance of their roles in larger conflicts, the traumatized individuals betray their duties as good citizens and fail to satisfy either their rulers or their consciences. For instance, in *Uṭārid*, the Cairene population surrenders to a foreign occupier, and commence to kill each other, practice prostitution, commit rape, and engage in other immoral acts. The people realize that they live in a miserable situation like hell and their future must inevitably be even more hellish. While many scenes in terror fiction are graphic or sadistic, they reflect the grim political reality that people live. In Egypt, the year 2011 constitutes the line between what can be viewed as terrible past and even darker present that leads the nation to fall apart. Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid* is representative of the hellish realities that Egyptians live due to the cumulative cultural trauma they have been experiencing.

As a work of cultural trauma, *Uṭārid* cynically presents the status of fatalism that characterizes life in modern Cairo. The novel begins with two scenes of slaughter. The first



one depicts a butcher slaughtering a calf and poor people eating its flesh during the ʿĪd al-Adḥā holiday. The second image is of a cannibalistic scene, in which a father kills all his family members, chops up their flesh, cooks them, and begins eating: “Taking his sharp little knife he had chopped up their lips and noses and ears, prized out their eyes, sliced away portions of their calves and thighs and dug out his wife’s breasts. . . . He had added the chopped onion, garlic and tomatoes to the bowls and then cooked it all in the kitchen” (5). After this bloody introductory chapter, the novel moves to the life in Cairo during the years 2025 and 2011 AD, and AH 455.<sup>13</sup> *ʿUṭārid* can also be described as a work of speculative fiction as it travels between histories, depicts many events of horror, dystopian, and science fantasy. While the events seem disconnected, all of the chapters focus on the endless hell that Egyptians live.

In the main plot, the narrator describes an imaginary era when the armed forces of the Republic of the Knights of Malta invade and occupy Egypt between 2023 and 2025. Not only is the constitution suspended, but all aspects of Egyptian life change. The traumatized civilians begin a new history in which they show no interest in resistance and display a tendency to move away from their social and nationalist values. Brainwashed, the people of Cairo accept the imported laws regarding prostitution, for instance, and they never describe the foreign forces as occupying powers. With a decline of morals and increase of crimes among the citizens, the protagonist Aḥmad ʿUṭārid and a group of fellow police officers begin their resistance against the foreign army. Traumatized by the hellish situation they live in during that time, many officers commit suicide. As a professional sniper, ʿUṭārid begins

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<sup>13</sup> AD is used to refer to the Gregorian calendars, and it stands for the Latin word “Anno Domini,” which means in the year of the Lord; it is also referred to as the Common Era calendar (CE). AH refers to the Islamic calendar and stands for the Latin word “Anno Hegirae,” which means the year of the Hijra (migration).

killing soldiers from the enemy forces, but he later shoots everyone just for the sake of killing. After independence, 'Uṭārid and the other officers begin killing their own citizens. The Cairene people realize that they still live in hell and the memory of their psychological damage “will continue to torment [them]” (329). Along with 'Uṭārid's story, the novel introduces many subplots and allegorical characters that represent the collective misery people experience. While the events are not narrated chronologically, the novel addresses the collective trauma of modern Egypt and depicts the people as victims of the current political decline.

From the onset of *'Uṭārid*, the narrator prepares his readers for shocking scenes of murders and violence. As previously mentioned, he begins with a scene of a butcher slaughtering a calf: “With his massive cleaver he struck the calf's forelegs a single blow to bring the animal down then passed the same blade over its neck, opening the rosy throat and an artery to send the blood jetting out in a clean line just like the line of water from a fountain” (1). Starting the narrative with a moment of slaughtering an animal intends to warn readers of scenes of murder, violence, and death that will follow. Although the scene seems realistic and does not necessarily induce feelings of terror as it depicts a ritual act practiced every year, Rabī' employs it as an allegory of the murder of passive human beings. The violence of the introductory chapter reaches an apex when a father kills his wife and children and cooks them. The narrator foreshadows the successive waves of violence when he says, “I saw that I would kill many people and that a great number of people would be killed in whose deaths I'd play no part. I saw that people would kill their children and eat their flesh” (5). With scenes of slaughter and a statement that foreshadows future events, the narrator sets the stage for more bloody incidents that will affect the entire society.

Similar to the line of blood he sees on the wall after slaughtering the calf, the narrator views another line from “the artery of a sixteen-year-old boy” (2). The novel here shifts from a ritual practice that is meant to be benevolent into a sadistic crime that intends to inflict pain, suffering, and humiliation on other people. The narrator describes the moment when the crime is committed: “They had been killed by blows from a kitchen knife, delivered some time ago by the father now sitting in front of the television” (3-4). The most shocking aspect of this crime is the reaction of the father who commits the murder. He records on camera the moments of killing his family members, watches a comic film, and tries to persuade the grandfather to eat the flesh of his slaughtered children and wife. The camera also records a “clip of the father cutting up a section of his wife’s thigh and another of him slicing her breasts with a showy deliberation. ... a clip of him unhurriedly and calmly chopping noses, ears and eyes” (6). Enjoying the moments of killing and eating their flesh, the father proudly admits his crime, believing that “[i]t’s best for them. ... They’ll go to heaven for sure... They won’t come back here” (7). For the father, committing such a crime is a benevolent act that ends the misery of the family members and sends them to a better hereafter.

While the narrator depicts the crime in detail, the motivations for this familicide seem contradictory. Confessing his crime to the prosecutor and judge, the murderer states that “he had murdered his family because he’d lost a lot of money on the stock exchange, and for no other reason” (8). The judge who keeps asking the same question, the defense’s arguments, and the punishment all appear to be absurd. Only the murderer “didn’t seem ridiculous” (9). The most surprising thing in the case is the sympathy that people offer to the killer: “People were confounded. They all felt for the killer” (9). The people’s sympathy with the murder reflects a status of collective trauma as they all believe that the motivations of the crime are

wrongly presented and cannot be reduced to an individual financial loss. The fact that the murderer belongs to the middle class makes him a member of the majority and qualifies his case to be a public concern: “He was the beau ideal of the contented middle class, a man with a secure future, envied by many for his stable life and beautiful family” (9). For the people, the grim reality of life in Cairo motivates the killer to commit his crime. Thus, the murderer himself is just a direct reason for the crime he commits, but he is ultimately a victim of larger socio-economic factors.

The real underlying motive for this crime epitomizes the reasons for the violence that appears throughout the novel. As the crime traumatizes the entire society, discussions of the case move from the court to the media: “Television talking heads seized on his story” (9), giving the crime more national dimensions. Although “[p]sychologists and sociologists offered no analysis” for such a crime, the claim that “losses on the stock exchange was very thin, too weak for the prosecutor to have advanced it as a motive in court” (9). Unlike *Hāris al-Tabgh* and *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, which introduce silent reactions to the loss of hope, *Uṭārid* presents violence as an inevitable product of despair. After showing how the court, police officers, media, and scholars fail to reach a conclusion regarding the crime’s motives, the narrator simply identifies the reason: “That guy who murdered his family lost hope, that’s why he killed them” (11). Indeed, the novel demonstrates that such a horrific crime cannot be reduced to oversimplified individualistic motives. The seemingly absurd scenes of violence connect the first chapter with a long chain of crimes that take place throughout the rest of the novel.

With the switch to the year 2025, the novel moves from individual experiences to national struggles. After a chapter with unspecified time that shows individual cases of

trauma, the narrator moves to a future period and describes the impacts of trauma on the national level. In that year, Egypt appears as a fragile country under a foreign occupation run by thousands of mercenaries. In a flashback, the narrator remembers the year 2023 when “[t]he armed forces of the Republic of the Knights of Malta have inflicted severe defeats on the Egyptian armed forces, and [when] the Arab Republic of Egypt ... [falls] under the control of the Fourth and Fifth Armies of the Knights of Malta” (28). The description of the citizens of the Republic of the Knights of Malta resembles the way the Arab media depicts the Jewish settlers in Palestinian lands. They “had no territory to its name. ... A state without citizens, just twenty thousand affiliates and four hundred thousand members” (28). While the events take place in the future, the narrator mentions *Voice of the Arabs* radio station and *BBC* before the announcement of the new occupation. By mentioning the names of these broadcasts which announced the defeat of the Arabs in the war of 1967, the narrator warns readers that this occupation will be a continuation of that horrific past.

The passivity of Egyptians becomes the main characteristic of this new era of defeat and humiliation. The novel shows that the majority of people do not fight to protect their country from occupation: “During this time, Egyptians offered their occupier no resistance” (29). People’s apathy reflects a loss of patriotism and profound feeling of the impossibility of national progress. Civilians, in fact, do not feel any difference between the yoke of the occupying forces and corruption of national governments. For that reason, “very quickly, life returned to normal” as if nothing happened (29). In the media, no one considers what happens as an occupation: “The word ‘occupation’ was never once glimpsed in the papers. It was never heard” (30). Not only do people show indifference, the media does not even talk about the new situation: “Very strange, that. I mean the journalists’ ready acceptance of the

occupier and the fact that they put up no resistance. Everyone acted like the whole affair was forgotten and went on with their daily lives” (30). The passivity of the ordinary people and the complicity of the media introduce a feeble nation that equates an oppression practiced by national authorities and an occupation run by foreigners.

The frightening army which occupies Cairo resembles a previous occupier of Egyptian land. The description of the Republic of the Knights of Malta in *‘Uṭārid* is similar to Arab’s typical depiction of the Israeli army that occupied the Sinai Peninsula in the 1967 war. Describing the enemies as “a bunch of mercenaries” (32), the narrator clarifies that the majority of the members of the Republic of the Knights of Malta are soldiers who leave their native lands to create a new state in Egypt: “Just shy of half a million men from various countries, all of them now citizens of the Republic of the Knights of Malta, and we, all pride set aside, were welcoming them as guests into our country” (32). Similar to the Israelis in Palestine, the Knights of Malta “determined that Egypt was a land where they could all settle down, and so they set out, sailing from points all over the globe to battleships and aircraft carriers moored off the Egyptian coast” (32). While many European powers are accused of facilitating the Israeli occupation of Arab land, the world helps the Knights of Malta to control Egypt: “It could be that the nations of the world had encouraged them to do so” (32). Reenacting the traumatic memories of Israeli occupation, the narrator seeks to induce a sense of fear in the hearts of his readers.

Not only they do not resist occupation, but the people become more obedient and accept the consequences of the foreign rule. This surrender facilitates the task for the occupying army to control the citizens: “People had stopped making complaints and had come to accept the thefts and kidnappings with equanimity” (30). The enormity of the thefts

makes the people bankrupt, and this consequently ends the motivations for thieving crimes: “There was nothing left to steal or anyone worth snatching. Maybe that was why the Knights of Malta’s task proved so very easy” (30-31). Although materialist-driven crimes decrease due to the poverty of people, violence increases. People start to quarrel for trivial reasons: “[T]he people were less familiar. Incessant cries rent the air. Squabbles were breaking out in every street, outside every shop, a stream of insults let loose to amuse, to humiliate, to threaten. Fights with fists and knife thrusts” (48). While violence escalates in this novel, the occupation succeeds in directing it toward the people. Instead of uniting against the Knights of Malta, the civilians waste their energy in minor issues and let their occupier rule them without any costs.

This status of surrender and passivity leads to a social crisis that ends with a mandatory introduction of practices that used to be prohibited in Cairo. During his walk in the streets of Cairo, the narrator depicts the consequences of the alien rule on the city. After occupation, Cairo becomes filthy, dangerous, and full of drug-addicted people, hashish smokers, and prostitutes. In one scene, he sees a naked woman standing in the street and asking for sex: “I’d never before seen a naked woman in a public place” (42). Covering only her face, the woman “wore nothing else, and the sagging flesh of her breasts and shoulders gave away her age” (42). Though he seizes the opportunity by having sex with the prostitute, the narrator feels estranged and alien in his home city after this experience. This feeling of alienation is explained by Frantz Fanon’s statement that “the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization” because he does not feel he belongs to his homeland (*Toward the African Revolution* 53). The social structure introduced

in the novel shows a divided and powerless community that becomes unable to resist alien values.

The social crisis becomes institutionalized during occupation through a series of constitutional changes approved by the religious authority and encouraged by the media. The new laws that legalize prostitution offer an example of how the social identity of Egyptian begins to shake under occupation. In order to make them acceptable for people, the new government imposes the laws through the parliament: “On the café’s television, I saw members of parliament voting on the new prostitution bill” (Rabī‘ 86). These alien laws do not correspond with the social identity of the Egyptians who have never experienced this openness. Sarcastically criticizing the law, the narrator says: “The whores are going to get a union; the trade will be licensed; my sister and my wife could go and work in brothel” (86). To prevent the civilians from objecting to this imported law, the authorities employ the media to convince people and prevent religious institutions and the educated elite from criticizing it: “There had been an organized media campaign to get people behind the bill and ensure they didn’t object. Al-Azhar’s sheiks, university professors, and intellectuals were silenced” (87). Indeed, the collective trauma of losing the social identity and normalizing alien laws further alienate the civilians and exacerbate their cultural trauma.

Similar to *Hāris al-Tabgh* and *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, *Uṭārid* relies on several historical events that go beyond the one-event based model of trauma. Along with the fictional incidents, the novel refers to real events such as the 1952 military coup, the 2011 revolution, and the massacre of Rābi‘a’s Square of 2013. For instance, the narrator thinks that the trauma of Egypt begins with the establishment of the Republic in 1952: “The coup of 1952 had swept all the cultivation to one side and cast the country into an abyss of darkness



and backwardness” (88). This coup and other later traumatic events lead to an economic and political decline and strike the values of the nation. Besides the misery people live, the new changes provoke “mass panic about declining morals” (67). The public spread of prostitution and the scenes of women selling their bodies in exchange for limited financial gain in Cairo’s streets reflect the enormity of the moral decline. This miserable situation leads people to view their traumatic past after 2011 as less tormenting than the suffering they experience under the rule of the Knights of Malta: “People had been yearning for that for the last ten years” (67). With a gradual process of collective psychological injury that increases over time, the novel introduces trauma as an accumulative experience of pain and misery.

With an increasing resentment among the minority and a sense of carelessness among the masses, Aḥmad ‘Uṭārid and a group of former fellow officers begin their resistance against the occupying forces. After a “serene madness afflicted Egyptians, allowing them to accept everything which had happened to them,” ‘Uṭārid and his colleagues decide they will “never work for the occupation” (33). They seek to defeat the foreign forces, gain independence, and spread an awareness among the stupefied masses. This disparity between a minority that resists and a majority unwilling to sacrifice anymore for their national cause shows an unbridgeable rift that divides Egyptians. Transcending the fear of the majority, the officers begin their armed struggle inflicting heavy losses on the enemy: “The resistance carried out assassinations of occupation soldiers, blew up their armored cars and tanks, mortared their bases, and launched missiles on their jets” (33). Although the events are narrated from the perspective of the officer ‘Uṭārid, the novel subtly criticizes the Egyptian army for its constant claims of being the only institution that can guide the nation in their struggles against foreign hegemony.

The portrayal of the dichotomy between civilians who surrender and a minority of police officers who prefer to resist and decolonize their country introduces a very complex picture of the national struggle in future Egypt. In this depiction, the boundaries between victimhood and murder are effaced and the goals of resistance are concealed. Ironically, the civilians who usually suffer most of the consequences of occupation do not fight for liberation. By contrast, the same cops, who used to rule and oppress the masses, resist and sacrifice their lives to force the enemies to leave the country. At first glance, the unwillingness of people to fight seems to be at odds with the values of freedom and liberation that most human beings believe in. However, reading the novel as a satire against the claims of the military elite that they protect the country explains this contradiction. For instance, the police officers usually claim that “no one was better suited to that than us” (35). This also can be read as a result of the brainwashing policy practiced by the ruling elite to force people to believe in their way of leading the country. For that reason, the crimes that the resistance groups commit appear as courageous acts of resistance and the civilian victims who do not resist appear as if they are treacherous.

As a perpetrator of trauma, ‘Uṭārid acts in an uncontrollable way not only because he wants to resist occupation, but also to compensate for the psychological loss he feels. Losing control of his actions and believing that violence is the only way to achieve his goals, ‘Uṭārid kills large numbers of innocent and powerless victims who do not constitute any threat: “I killed the Egyptian wife of the commander of the Cairo Military Zone. ... I went on firing and killed five people I didn’t know, then shot at random into the crowd. I killed a total of twenty individuals that day” (38). ‘Uṭārid’s obsession with random shootings becomes a means through which the novel introduces the lingering effects of trauma on Egyptian youth.

As a young sniper, ‘Uṭārid’s violent attitude toward the masses shows a sudden fracturing of the self and weak personality that tries to escape the traumatizing reality through murderous acts. As ‘Uṭārid tries to escape the grim present, his dissociative tendencies overwhelm him with many questions about contradictory possibilities: “Do I have to kill this one, or is it pointless? Is killing this one a punishment or a message?” (39). With these conflicting tendencies, the reader is exposed to larger debates about the different possibilities of national struggle.

The uncontrollable violence of the officers in the novel exposes the contrast between the struggle for self-interest and the national cause. At the beginning, the resistance aims to force the foreign army to leave the country, but the random killings become a means for revenge on both the occupiers and the masses. In a very shocking scene, the narrator includes a long list of his victims’ names: “I killed Ziyād Moḥamed Bakir with a single bullet. I killed Shehāb Ḥassan ‘Abdo ‘Abdel-Magid with a shot to the head. I killed Karīm Midḥat Wahba with a shot to the right side of his chest. I killed Mamdūḥ Sayyid Maṣṣūr” and so on (147). In five successive pages, the protagonist recounts the memory of one day in which he kills dozens of people randomly for no specific reason. After killing this large number of victims, the narrator contemplates on his mission and expresses his loss of hope: “I despaired of any change—and then I felt a complete conviction, a true belief, that not a single soul would rise up. I knew that the revolution would not happen” (149). ‘Uṭārid believes that everything he does for resistance is “pointless” and he is “taking [his] revenge on them all” (149). Indeed, the protagonist’s thought that the situation is beyond change provokes him to kill more and satisfy his unrestrained desire to murder.

The most horrifying and pathetic aspect of the shooting scene appears in the way the victims react. After ‘Uṭārid completes his daily mission of killing as much people as he can, he hears cries from civilians asking him not to stop: “In the gloom below, I heard people’s cries rise up, mournful and wracked with grief because I had stopped firing. I heard them chant, ‘Where have you gone? Come back and shoot!’” (150). The people here request ‘Uṭārid to shoot them and end their life. For them, life parallels hell, and death becomes their means to escape the trauma they live. This scene of people seeking death is a recurrent theme in Arabic horror fiction and resembles that of the protagonist in *Ḥāris al-Tabgh* and Salwān in *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, who frequently think of ending their lives when they lose hope of change. Thus, the desire to die that people express in *‘Uṭārid* reflects a profound level of collective trauma and as a sense of despair of a better future. The hellish reality they experience daily suppresses any positive feelings that life in Cairo is worthy of living.

The connection between the personal and the collective that Rabī‘ and other terror fiction writers emphasize in their texts aims to address larger socio-political issues that concern the public rather than the private individuals. Rabī‘ employs several symbolic characters in the form of national allegory to shed light on the cultural trauma of Egypt. One of the most significant characters in the novel is Farīda, who can be read as an allegory of the submissive Egypt. When the narrator meets Farīda, who is a prostitute working in a newly opened brothel in the Sharif Street at the center of East Cairo, she does not look at him. She considers him “just a john going up and down the stairs on Sharif Street” (91). Having an “almost pharaonic face” (91), Farīda resembles Egypt with its long history. Similar to the country which submits to several foreign occupations that steal its natural resources, Farīda succumbs to many men who use her body. While foreign powers admire Egyptian politicians

who facilitate the occupation of the country, ‘Uṭārid thanks “the pimps in parliament who had sacrificed everything to bring us the joy of these exquisites” (92). Thus, Farīda’s work as a prostitute who offers her body to strangers is an allegory of the subordinate nation that accepts foreign dictations.

The death of Farīda can be read as a metaphor for the pessimistic fate that awaits the country. Farīda, who also has a medical education and works in a hospital, accepts working as a prostitute since the new government permits that practice. Exploited by her society, she always works hard for others at the expense of her health and honor. When she decides to revolt at the end of the novel, her life ends tragically. One day, Farīda “had shot two clients in her room, who subsequently turned out to be police officers. For some reason, she had then decided to come out of her room and shoot some more people. Fifteen rounds at six different people, and she’d hit them all” (320-21). Unlike the criminals in the novel, who shoot people without any consequences, Farīda is arrested and sentenced to death. Publicly executed, Farīda’s body is left to a crowd of “masturbating” men, who cut up her body (338). After failing to protect Farīda from her humiliating death, ‘Uṭārid feels that he is “possessed by an absolute conviction that an eternal justice was guiding Farīda’s destiny, cleansing her of the sins that had once defiled her in a hell that was not this hell of ours” (322-23). Similarly, the catastrophic fate of Egypt is a result of past mistakes that can only be fixed with a traumatic ending that might transfer the country into a better future reality.

Although the novel shows that the hellish reality that Egyptians live is a result of a series of events happened throughout the last decades, the year 2011 seems the most decisive year in this history. After ten chapters talking about the year 2025, the narrator switches back to 2011. Introducing several subplots, this sudden flashback functions as a haunting reminder

that all events are interconnected. The garbage man is one of the figures that are introduced to represent the harsh reality of 2011. Although his “body was enormous” and strong, he only uses his power to rape children, scavenge for food, and beg or steal money. When a group of more powerful young men attack him, he does not resist and receives “their blows in silence” (226). The dark reality in Cairo, where the strong oppresses the weak, is embodied in that subplot. In the Pyramids Street, a road with great hills of garbage as high as the Giza Pyramids, the garbage man creates his home beneath one of the trash heaps under a bridge. The comparison between these trash pyramids with those of the Great Pyramid of Giza shows that the conditions of life in modern Cairo become more terrible and savage than that of ancient times. Egypt, which is known as one of the greatest ancient civilizations, lives under one of its barbaric moments in history.

Zahra, a four-year old girl, is another allegorical character that may represent the new generation in the novel. Finding her abandoned in the school where he works during the days of the 2011 revolution, Insāl volunteers to take care of Zahra until he finds her missing father. Expecting that her father died in the revolution, Insāl takes Zahra to hospitals every day, hoping that he will find him or find out about her family. The strange disease that Zahra develops during the search can be understood as a metaphor for the political realities at that time. In the beginning, her skin creeps out and covers her lips, “sealing up the mouth” (228). The disease develops and the skin covers the nose, eyes, and ears, transforming Zahra into a piece of flesh with no distinctive features. With the loss of her senses, Zahra’s “isolation was complete” (249). The description of Zahra losing her senses due to the disease is similar to the loss of national communication that happens under totalitarian governments. Zahra is

isolated from her society: she can't speak, hear, or see, and the youth in Egypt are silenced, prisoned, neglected, and oppressed.

Unable to communicate, Zahra's life is reduced to her painful memories. Zahra's attempts to escape the terrible present is confronted with a very tragic past full of difficulties: "I remember nothing but my torment. No images or sounds but those I saw and heard in my torment" (295). The tragic past that Zahra lives seems to be a collective experience as several characters in the novel share it. When Zahra's relatives appear at the end of the novel, they tell her that her father and aunt have the same disease. This family disease resembles the transgenerational trauma that inflicts people of different generations. The disease prevents Zahra and her family members from communicating, deforms them physically, isolates them socially, and affects their identity forever. Comparably, the political failure of the government during the revolution paralyzes the country, weakens it, and tears its social fabric in an unhealable way.

Whenever the narrative shifts to the year 2011, the author changes the narrator and the protagonist 'Uṭārid disappears. Those chapters are narrated from the perspective of a third-person omniscient point of view. While the connection between the events and characters in the years 2011 and 2025 seems incomprehensible as 'Uṭārid does not meet or interact with any of these characters, the frequent shifts to the time of the 2011 revolution provide a historical context for the hellish realities after fourteen years of that political change. Rabī' warns his readers that an inevitable catastrophic reality will come to an existence in the next decade or so. The scenes of uncontrollable violence during the revolution, mysterious illness, and filthy people only produce more terrible outcomes that the author describes in great detail. These unwanted painful scenes from the year of revolution

interrupt the narrative and appear unexpectedly in the novel the same way intrusive memories disrupt the victims of trauma.

In the middle of *Uṭārid*, Rabīʿ introduces one of the most puzzling chapters in the novel. Beside the shifts between 2011 and 2025, *Uṭārid* returns to the year AH 455 (1063 AD ) to introduce a young man named Ṣakhr al-Khazarji, who dies in that year. Since Sahkr's childhood, everyone expected him to die before the age of twenty: "They said that he was marked, a Son of Death. They said he would die a boy and would not see out his twentieth year" (197). They also believe that "his death would be a sign for our time, ... the day of his death would be a great day" (197). When that day comes, women will lament and weep, and it happens to be "a terrible day, more terrible perhaps than any we had known before" (198), to the extent that all people pray that God might lift from them the difficulties they experience. Rabīʿ uses a very high classical Arabic that resembles the Qurānic description of the Day of Judgment. When they prepare to bury him, Ṣakhr is "risen again after he had died" (206). Preaching to the people, Ṣakhr says: "You were not, nor did you live. You are the sons of guile. You lived in hope, and hope there is none" (208). While Ṣakhr dies and comes to life again to confirm to his people that there is no hope in this world, the narrator realizes that "we were in hell" (208). Although the chapter may refer to a historic famine that took place in Egypt at the end of the twelfth century, Rabīʿ employs Ṣakhr's story to compare that historical calamity with the modern misfortune in Cairo. The use of Sahkr's death story and his rise again are employed to emphasize that the hell his people live is more terrible than the hell they fear in the hereafter.

The withdrawal of the Knights of Malta from Egypt after a short occupation demonstrates that the trauma of Egyptian cannot be reduced to a foreign occupation.



Although the new rulers of Egypt are local military figures, their existence perpetuates the national trauma and divides the country again. ‘Uṭārid refuses to express his happiness or celebrate the evacuation of the foreign forces for he believes that the hell will continue forever. When he sees people’s “smiles returned to faces” (274), he thinks “[a]ll of them would soon be back in torment” (274). ‘*Uṭārid*’s pessimistic attitude toward independence proves to be justified as the new military government oppresses civilians the same way the army of the Knights of Malta does. Just three months after independence, people realize that their hopes have been in vain: “Everything turned upside down: the smiles vanished and violence reclaimed its place in people’s lives. They were throwing themselves off rooftops once again, stoning each other to death in the streets, and the vast majority couldn’t care less about what was happening” (277). The way that people’s hopes vanish quickly after the new military elites rule the country resembles the frustration that Egyptians lived after they received false promises from the military leaders in the aftermath of the 2013 coup d’état.

‘Uṭārid’s persistence to continue his mission of shooting civilians after independence and the realization that he will no longer overcome his trauma correspond with the debate that trauma is unhealable. In ‘*Uṭārid*, the impacts of the accumulative traumatic experiences affect characters even after the Knights of Malta evacuate the country. Unlike Salwān who recovers from his trauma in *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, Rabī’s characters show the impossibility of recovery. ‘Uṭārid, for instance, wanders in the streets, “shooting everyone [he] felt deserved to go heaven” (322). General Kamāl al-Asūṭi’s objection to ‘Uṭārid’s excessive violence after independence shows the insanity trauma causes the protagonist: “Prior to the evacuation, we were killing people as part of a master plan, which, as you have seen,

succeeded. But your recent killings are meaningless, motiveless” (313). ‘Uṭārid’s dialogue with another officer named “the Saint” prior to Farīda’s execution explains the irrecoverable consequences of cultural trauma. When ‘Uṭārid says: “What’s happening is more than anyone can bear” (328), the Saint confirms to him that they will never resume their life normally: “... the damage done to the souls here cannot be effaced by entering into heaven. These souls will remain weakened forever. ... the memory of it will continue to torment us” (328-29). Feeling that the situation is hopeless, ‘Uṭārid and other characters come to realization that their life becomes an endless hell.

While the novel does not focus on one specific historical event, it shows that the cultural trauma that Egyptians suffer is caused by an accumulation of series of events. In a long dialogue with ‘Uṭārid before hearing the news of Farīda’s crime, the Saint explains the difficulties of reconstructing their nation after occupation as it suffers successive traumas: ““We’re trying to rebuild Egypt, to repair the damage done to the state in recent years. This damage didn’t just happen under the occupation. No, it’s the product of decades of improvisation, lack of planning, repeated failure, of correcting mistakes with mistakes more destructive still” (315). The trauma that the Saint describes is not just a simple wound that can be located and cured. It is a chronic condition that is persistent and long-lasting in its effects. This traumatic situation begins long decades ago but worsens under totalitarian governments and foreign hegemony.

Rabī‘ makes the link between the personal experiences of his characters and the collective suffering of Egyptians explicit as he addresses national trauma. The narrator’s use of singular and plural pronouns corresponds with this goal. While he uses singular pronouns when he depicts his inner emotions, the narrator often ends his reflections with plural

references to indicate the national implications of that feeling. In one quote, he begins with personal concerns, saying: “I was in shock, unable to move, and it seemed to me as though everything had suddenly collapsed on top of me” (257). However, he ends the quote with a plural pronoun that refers to the collective trauma of his people: ““I knew that we were in hell” (257). When he longs for death as an individual victim, he uses a plural pronoun to show that he is one member of a large number of people who are traumatized as a result of shared catastrophic events: “Death was the kindest form of mercy in this hell of ours” (269). Similar to the protagonist who embodies the nation, other characters such as Zahra, Farīda, the garbage man, and Insāl all represent some aspects of the collective identity of Egypt.

Part of Rabī‘’s success stems from his ability to rely on distinctive literary techniques that challenge readers and immerse them on a journey of hell and trauma. From the shocking introductory chapter that foreshadows the catastrophic series of events to the existentialist ending that induces feelings of despair and disgust, the novel succeeds in depicting the legacies of the collective trauma that Egyptians live nowadays. Rabī‘’s complex narrative structure switches between eras, contains several disconnected subplots, relies on repetitions, creates many meaningless and pessimistic moments, and employs allegorical characters. The connection he makes between the personal experiences of his characters and the socio-political and economic failures of the Egyptian nation elevates the events to the level of cultural trauma. The excessive use of violent subplots and the endless scenes of death, disease, injustice, and prostitution traumatize the readers and introduce them to bitter aspects of the situation in Egypt. Rabī‘ uses different levels of Arabic to fit the situation and reach a wider audience. In the chapter that talks about the rise of Şakhr al-Khazarji in the year AH 455, he uses a high classical language similar to medieval writings. When depicting the year

2011, Rabī‘ mostly uses Modern Standard language. In the chapters that take place on the year 2025, vulgar words from colloquial language appear, paralleling the moral decline that people live.

In reading Badr’s, Ghālī’s, and Rabī‘’s novels through the prism of trauma theory, this chapter extends and challenges such a western-based theory by offering a reading of a literature from the Global South like the Arabic terror fiction. Additionally, this chapter has demonstrated the importance of historicizing the traumatic experience to understand the broader circumstances that engender such examples of cultural trauma which inflicts on entire societies. A close reading of three novels shows that this literature is not homogeneous in terms of such debates in trauma theory as the possibility of healing after traumatic experiences. Unlike the protagonists in *Hāris al-Tabgh* and *‘Uṭārid*, whose trauma seems unhealable, Salwān in *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* recovers through a social means of healing (i.e., marriage). It is worth to mention that by reading these novels allegorically, the boundaries between the individual experience and the collective predicament are often blurred. When the narrators recount the sufferings of their characters, they employ allegorical techniques to generalize their messages and address broader socio-political issues that concern the masses in their nations. The tremendous social impacts and the ways characters feel they have been subjected to great misfortunes qualify these texts to be read as works of cultural trauma.

## CHAPTER 3

### Breaking the Three Taboos of Religion, Sex, and Politics

Cairo's not what you'd expect from a city of its size. In spite of its teeming millions, this is a city that is hopelessly repressed. A coalition of social, political, and religious taboos conspires to keep everything that ferments in the city's underbelly from rising to the surface (Nāji 44).

When Aḥmad Nāji received a two-year prison sentence for the content of one of his chapters in *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (The Use of Life)*, he was not the first Egyptian novelist to be jailed for breaking taboos. Many other writers such as Ṣun' Allāh Ibrāhīm and Nawāl el-Saa'dawi were imprisoned for criticizing political or religious figures. However, Nāji was the first writer in the modern history of Egypt to be jailed for the sexual material he included in his novel or for "violating public modesty" as far as the court could tell. The phenomenon of including sexual content is not new in Arabic literature. Very prominent authors such as 'Imru' al-Qays (501-544), 'Umar ibn Abi Rabi'ah (644-712), Abū Nuwās (756-814), and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (1445-1505) all included explicit sexual images in their works. However, unlike the classical writers who addressed the sexual taboo as a form of lechery or for didactic reasons as in the case of al-Suyūfī, Nāji's taboo-breaking novel represents a new phenomenon in Arabic literature, where authors intentionally focus on sex, criticize politics, and demean religion as reactions to the trauma they suffer after the recent uprisings in their home countries.

Building on Nāji's intervention, this chapter discusses several Iraqi and Egyptian works of terror fiction in terms of their treatments of the three salient taboos in the Arab World: religion, sex, and politics. Challenging the socio-political and religious hegemony, terror fiction writers break taboos in order to express their feelings of suffering and to raise

an awareness regarding the necessity of change and the importance of liberating themselves from the restrictions they experience under totalitarian governments. I argue that by addressing very sensitive topics such as religion, politics, and sex in an unconventional way, these authors succeed in establishing a new powerful voice that destabilizes the public's beliefs in these long-held notions. Furthermore, using these taboos in the context of terror fiction introduces the traditional treatment of religious, sexual, and political topics as a source of trauma that prevents their countries from healing. Because of the failure of the traditional socio-political solutions to help people overcome their traumatic experiences, authors lose faith in what these values represent. Writing fictional works that violate the sanctity of these taboos, terror fiction authors express their resentment and criticism of the hegemonic, patriarchal, and totalitarian rules that keep them prisoners to their own trauma.

Traumatic events shatter the construction of the self and reshape relationships between the victims and their societies. The basic system of human relations shakes under the influence of trauma and the meanings of the individuals' attachments to their families, friends, and communities may change or become unstable. Judith Herman argues that traumatic experiences "undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (51). During a traumatic experience, the terrorized victims immediately seek protection in their basic senses of trust such as the social or religious systems of comfort. However, as Herman adds, "[w]hen this cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered. Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life" (52). This sense of alienation may affect the victims' relationships to their own selves, families, and religions, reshaping their

identities and creating a crisis of faith. The product of this experience is tormented victims, who act in contradictory ways: “Because of their difficulty in modulating intense anger, survivors oscillate between uncontrolled expressions of rage and intolerance of aggression in any form” (56).

Traumatized by the rapid and acute deterioration in their countries, writers of Arabic terror fiction capture the sense of self-shattering and the status of fractured bonds with others. Trying to write a literature that mimics the loss of faith in their sense of trust, the writers use unconventional linguistic expressions and uncommon images that capture the exceptional challenges that their societies encounter. Similar to Herman’s theory, which addresses the loss of faith in religion and society, terror fiction authors express this loss by focusing on themes that deal with the lack of belief in the societal conventions. This loss of belief manifests itself in the way those authors revolt against the taboo of publicly speaking about sex, religion, and politics. By breaking these taboos, the authors show an unprecedented level of resentment, establishing a literary mode that speaks about the unspeakable. They defy the governmental rules of censorship and face the wrath of the social, political, and religious authorities. Addressing openly and excessively these taboos, terror fiction authors seek to delve into the human psyche of traumatized people and talk about their experiences using a level of language that sometimes resembles the vulgar speech that one can hear in the streets of Baghdad or Cairo during a quarrel or dispute.

Although breaking taboos is a multifaceted phenomenon that appears at different times in Arabic literary history, there has been a striking absence of detailed critical studies that analyze the uses of taboos in Arab culture and literature. This shortage adds more ambiguity to this issue, which has come to the fore again with the rise of terror fiction in the

last fifteen years. The limited number of studies available often reduce the issue to oversimplified interpretations that are applicable to modern and medieval literature, including pleasure, debauchery, blasphemy, didacticism, and so on. Modern studies tend to connect this issue to the unstable rules of censorship in Arab countries as well as to the foreign policies and tendencies that also select which taboos should be translated into Western languages and which should not. For instance, in his study of the English translation of Alā' al-Aswānī's *Imārat Ya'qūbiyyān* (*The Yacoubian Building*), Sharīf Ismā'īl maintains that the English version of al-Aswānī's novel was a success because it complies with Western preconceptions about the Arab World (919). Ismā'īl specifies that al-Aswānī gained popularity in the West because he succeeded in introducing himself as “a dissident figure, who dares to break indigenous taboos, reiterates a universalized discourse of human rights, and promotes democracy, echoing, sustaining and indirectly opening doors to the neoliberal ‘civilizing’ project” (919). Al-Aswānī and many other contemporary Arab writers, whose work is described as “writing for translation,” tailor their work to suit the needs of Western publishing companies. Similarly, the Lebanese novelist Najwa Barakāt claims that foreign publishers tend to “over-sell ‘taboo-breaking’ Arab writing that discusses religion, politics and sex” (qtd. in *Lynx-Qualey*). Barakāt maintains that many Western publishers translate taboo-breaking works despite their low literary quality because these texts “seem to be ‘eavesdropping on what is hidden and restricted’” and because they “line up with Western fantasies about Arabs” (qtd. in *Lynx-Qualey*).

The rapid increase of literary works that break the taboos of religion, sex, and politics reflects a new situation, in which totalitarian states lose their power to completely censor or prevent the publication of such materials. Arab governments use censorship to prevent the



public from reading works that they consider dangerous for the national values or the security of their countries. For instance, the Sudanese government banned al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Mawsim al-Hijrah ilā al-Shamāl* (*Season of Migration to the North*) for several years as it contained graphic sexual scenes. Muḥammad Shukrī's *al-Khubz al-Ḥāfi* (*For Bread Alone*), which was translated into more than thirty languages, appeared in French, for instance, before it was published in the original Arabic due to the strict rules of censorship in Morocco. Alā' al-Aswānī's *Imārat Ya'qūbiyyān* (*The Yacoubian Building*), which was the best-selling Arabic novel for 2002 and 2003, was banned for a while in Egypt because it deals with homosexuality and political taboos. Najīb Maḥfūz's *Awlād Ḥāratinā* (*Children of Our Alley*) was also banned due to its controversial religious allegories. Although most Arab regimes impose strict rules that crack down on the violating authors and criminalize the publication of such works, the internet has contributed to the dramatic spread of taboo literature and facilitated the process for exile writers to spread their censored texts without the need for publication permissions from Arab governments. With the fall of the regimes in Iraq in 2003 and Egypt in 2011, writers removed the fear of breaking taboos and began to address sex, religion, and politics more openly, finding in these topics a metaphor for revolt against all kinds of oppression.

This chapter seeks to redress the lack of taboo studies by offering a close reading of a few Iraqi and Egyptian texts of terror fiction. While reading Ḥasan Balāsīm's *Ma'riḍ al-Juthath* (*The Corpse Exhibition*) and Aḥmad Nājī's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* (*The Use of Life*) closely, some instances from other works such as 'Alī Badr's *Ḥāris al-Tabgh* (*The Tobacco Keeper*) and Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid* are included as they all address controversial topics of sex, religion, and politic. Losing belief in the traditional categories of sacred and profane,

these authors transformed their thoughts into audacious fictional works that shocked Arab readers, especially when they were first published. Although these taboo topics are widely spoken about among the ordinary people, they rarely appear in writings. These prohibited topics, as Freud states, “must have concerned activities towards which there was a strong inclination. They must then have persisted from generation to generation, perhaps merely as a result of tradition transmitted through parental and social authority” (*Totem and Taboo* 37). In addition to the role of society in maintaining these taboos as Freud mentions, the modern Arab state also adds lists of political taboos that function as tools to subjugate civilians and keep them under control. Examining taboos in Arabic terror fiction can help the reader see a common thread connected to the traumatic experiences that people survive in Iraq and Egypt and help explain the status of victimhood they claim.

### **Ḥasan Balāsīm’s Stories: Offending Religion as a Response to Trauma**

I think Iraq is more dangerous now than before; there is more control. Before you knew who the dictator was and who will put you in jail, but now you don’t know who it is who will kill you. My best friend was murdered for making radio programmes about corruption – they shot him in cold blood in his house after he returned from Holland. Violence is everywhere in Iraq, you can see it on TV and in pictures and in the streets, but you can’t write about love and sex. Religion is a big problem. People need to talk about the problems of religion as well as the problem of the West. All the time I want to go back, every day I think ‘I will go back to Iraq’ but my friends all say I should stay outside.

—Ḥasan Balāsīm (qtd. in Irving).

As one of the most prominent Arab short story writers, Ḥasan Balāsīm draws a broad picture of human suffering in his works, a breadth that may reflect what he had encountered as a trauma survivor. Shocking his readers with images of death, terror, violence, nightmares,

and suffering, Balāsīm's writing style is shaped by the difficult circumstances he experienced before he came into prominence as a writer. Before he became a refugee, Balāsīm went through many challenges in his life, especially during the reign of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, when he was arrested more than once. Because of his fear of the Iraqi intelligence, he fled Baghdad in 1998, heading to the city of Sulaymaniya in the Iraqi Kurdish territories. In that city, he continued his career as a filmmaker and produced films like *The Wounded Camera* under a pseudonym. In 2004, Balāsīm travelled illegally throughout Europe and he lost three fingers of his left hand in an accident before he finally settled in Finland, where he gained his citizenship. In one interview, Balāsīm briefly describes his journey:

It took me four years to get from Baghdad to Finland. In that period I crossed the borders of Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and so on. It took me so long because I didn't have any money. I had to work in Istanbul, for example, until I saved the money to pay the traffickers. Of course, the first attempt falls through, so you return to Istanbul to work again, you work on the black market so sometimes you don't get paid. I worked in a restaurant for three weeks— like a donkey, as we say in Arabic—and I wasn't paid. And I lost some fingers in a machine in Sofia. (Yāssīn-Kassāb)

The oppression Balāsīm lived, the fear he experienced, and the hardships he encountered as a refugee are all reflected in his fiction. He writes about the terror Iraqis lived through under totalitarian governments, the aftermath of the US occupation, the refugee crisis, terrorism, and the chaos of the civil war.

Balāsīm is not the only writer to address taboo topics, but his writing style has significantly contributed to the development of the terror mode in Arabic fiction and brought

the voices of the Iraqi trauma victims to a broader audience. His critical attitude toward many conventional topics shocks his readers, who find in him a determined writer who does not fear to expose the collective impulses that reside in the collective unconscious of the Iraqis. In one interview, he talked about his iconoclastic style: “It was difficult under Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Most plays and novels used symbolic language because there was heavy censorship, so this was the only way they could express things. Now I prefer to get to the heart of the matter, to not use metaphor” (Irving).

Along with breaking the three taboos of religion, sex, and politics, Balāsīm breaks the linguistic conventions in Arabic literature and uses a language that is widely perceived as rude, vulgar, and obscene. In one interview, he states that he is not interested in preserving “the beauty of the Arabic language” (Irving). For him, a writer should be direct and realistic in the use of language: “During the civil war in Iraq, people were still talking about the beauty and sacredness of Arabic as a language. I reject writers who concentrate on the beauty of the language rather than the violence of events” (Irving). This linguistic audacity introduces Balāsīm as a rebellious writer with a distinct style.

Described by *The Guardian* newspaper as “perhaps the best writer of Arabic fiction alive” (Flood), Balāsīm’s work, according to *The Skinny* magazine, “[n]ever flinches from gore, sex, violence, blasphemy or misery – nor do these tropes ever feel exploitative” (Gieben 18). *The Skinny* adds that “[t]he rich combination of pitch-black gallows humour and fantastical flights from reality are utterly compelling – more real than anything you have read before about Iraq” (18). Talking to the journalist Ben East from *The National Newspaper*, Balāsīm says: ““People die in the street because of some roadside bomb and yet all everyone talks about is this beautiful, sentimental, poetic Arab language that I’m supposedly

destroying. But who is writing about what it's really like, about this nightmarish, unreal violence people are experiencing?" (East). With a powerful iconoclastic literary style, Balāsīm gives a voice to the marginalized Iraqi, who still live an ongoing trauma in their homeland and in the diaspora. Although he is constantly attacked for dealing with taboo topics and for his use of an obscene language, Balāsīm's fame has grown steadily and his works have been widely read in the Arab World and Europe, particularly after the publication of his short story collection *Ma'riḍ al-Juthath (The Corpse Exhibition)* in 2009.

*Ma'riḍ al-Juthath* consists of twenty-five stories of trauma that deal mostly with themes of psychological terror, loss of faith, fundamentalism, and immigration. Jonathan Wright translated eighteen stories from this collection into English and published them in three separate books: *The Madman of Freedom Square* (2013), *The Iraqi Christ* (2013), and *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* (2014). Many of these stories are cross listed in the three books. The title of the Arabic collection, *Ma'riḍ al-Juthath (The Corpse Exhibition)*, seems offensive as it can be viewed as an invitation to violate the sanctity of dead people. In Arabo-Islamic culture, the body of the dead person should be honored and buried as soon as possible. However, the choice of the word "ma'riḍ" in the title may refer to an exhibition, show, fair, exposition, display, museum, or other types of showing. This use is often associated with displaying commercial materials for a long time as in fairs, markets, or museums. With this remarkable title that goes against religious norms, Balāsīm begins this collection of terror and taboo tales by combining the marketing with death, implying that the horror people experience benefits others financially.

The opening story in *Ma'riḍ al-Juthath*, "al-Arshīf wal-Wāqī" ("The Reality and the Record"), includes several critical references to religion and religious groups. It begins with

an Iraqi asylum seeker in a reception center in the city of Malmö in Sweden. The man tells how he was kidnapped while working as an ambulance driver in the winter of 2006. He was forced to film numerous videos for terrorist groups, playing different roles, including an Iraqi officer, Sunni, Shiite, Kurdish, Christian, Afghani, Syrian, Iranian, Saudi, and even a Spanish soldier. Although he flees Iraq and finally arrives Sweden as a refugee, it is not clear whether he is telling the truth or is just fabricating the story to be granted a humanitarian asylum.

As the title suggests, there is a difference between the real stories of refugees and the tales they narrate to gain asylum. While the immigration department writes down the recorded stories and preserves them in special files, the real stories of the refugees “remain locked in the hearts of the refugees, for them to mull over in complete secrecy. That’s not to say it’s easy to tell the two stories apart. They merge and it becomes impossible to distinguish them” (Balāsīm, *The Madman* 1). With these conflicting narratives, the narrator sets the stage for the story of terrorism in Iraq and its political and commercial implications. Explaining the agenda behind the acts of terrorism during the Iraq War, the protagonist includes a direct criticism against religion and politics.

Told by a third-person omniscient narrator, “al-Arshīf wal-wāqi” deals with the propaganda that accompanied terrorist attacks during the Iraq War. For the unnamed protagonist, who is kidnapped by numerous militias, terrorists and politicians employ religion to create a false propaganda that promotes violence and perpetuates the struggle. The hero begins the story as a simple believer who is dedicated to his religion and good morals: “They even invited me to join them in a drink but I declined and told them I was a religious man” (1). His belief makes him strong during the long months he spends as a captive: “I felt that God ... would never abandon me throughout my ordeal. I felt the presence of God

intensely in my heart, nurturing my peace of mind and calling me to patience” (1). Spending most of his life as a good Muslim, the protagonist’s faith does not waver as he experiences miserable times as a hostage. However, as he finally realizes that the leaders of the terrorist groups who arrest him play a political game in the name of religion, he condemns religion and the hypocrisy of religious leaders.

The protagonist implies that religion is a main cause of his tragedy. In a flashback, he remembers a statement by the director of the Emergency Department in the hospital where he works: “Spilt blood and superstition are the basis of the world. Man is not the only creature who kills for bread, or love, or power, because animals in the jungle do that in various ways, but he is the only creature who kills because of faith” (2-3). Calling the director a philosopher and professor, the protagonist admires the man’s deep understanding of the world. He later realizes that the professor’s views on religion as a source of misery describe accurately the conflict that takes place in Baghdad after occupation. While he does not pay attention to the director’s statement on faith before he is kidnapped, the protagonist confirms the accuracy of that aphorism when he flees to Sweden. Upon his request for humanitarian asylum, the protagonist claims that he is a victim of everyone. Since his basic trust is shattered, he blames them all for being responsible for his trauma: “I am asking for asylum in your country because of everyone. They are all killers and schemers—my wife, my children, my neighbors, my colleagues, *God, his Prophet*, the government, the newspapers, even the Professor whom I thought an angel” (11, emphasis added). Blaming God and the prophet for such a trauma reflects the protagonist’s loss of faith, as his cries for his basic senses of trust are not answered.

After being forced to record videos for numerous militias in which he acts as if he is the representative or the spokesman of such murderous groups, the protagonist condemns all the armed groups when he flees to Sweden. His condemnation targets the religious militias which he thinks are responsible for most of the violence. While he quotes his director's statement about faith at the beginning of the story without expressing his approval, the narrator comes to a conclusion at the end that the members of these groups are criminals. Unlike many Iraqis in the media, for instance, who often imply that terrorism comes from members who belong to other sects and acquit their political or religious groups, the narrator blames everyone. He mentions that he is forced to record videos for Sunni and Shiite extremist militias. In one scene, he is asked to announce that he is "the new leader of the al Qā'idah organization in Mesopotamia" (10). In another phase of his journey as a hostage, he is also forced to appear in a video, announcing that he "belonged to the Mehdī Army and [he] was a famous killer, [he] had cut off the heads of hundreds of Sunni men, and [he] had support from Iran" (9).

With all these moments of sectarian violence, the narrator realizes that Sunni and Shiite extremist groups all conspire against the Iraqi people and benefit from the status of civil war that escalated in Baghdad around the year 2006. Those groups cooperate secretly with each other and make efforts to recruit men to benefit financially from the chaos in the city. For instance, the narrator is sold several times to multiple groups that appear to the public as hostile, but he realizes that they are actually allies. Even the cameraman who produces the videos for the terrorist groups is the same person: "I noticed the cameraman's gestures, and I thought that surely he was the cameraman for all the groups and maybe the mastermind of this dreadful game" (11).



The alliance between religious figures and politicians seems evil in “al-Arshīf wal-Wāqi’.” When religious fundamentalism and politics intersect, religion serves politics and provides politicians with moral justifications to subjugate people. According to Haytham Bāhūra, sectarianism in “al-Arshīf wal-Wāqi’” is employed as a political tool rather than religious instrument. He adds that the “instrumentalization of sectarian identity by armed militias has less to do with a fervent belief than with a cynical and opportunistic exploitation of the political space that links power to such identities” (201). What seems a sectarian clash between Sunnis and Shiites in Baghdad is in reality a game planned by the hypocrite leaders who employ the clash to consolidate their power at the expense of the powerless civilians. The ordinary people who lose their lives and freedom or flee their homeland are the victims of such an evil alliance.

It is worth mentioning that “al-Arshīf wal-Wāqi’” could be a reflection of some aspects of Balāsīm refugee’s story. Balāsīm’s journey from Baghdad to Sulaymaniya in 1998, his four-year long illegal migration, and his arrival to Finland in 2004 as a refugee represent his archived story. However, it is not clear if this recorded story corresponds with his real journey as a refugee. Balāsīm’s constant attack against religion could be read as a reenactment or response for a trauma that he might have experienced as a liberal artist who criticized the political and religious turmoil in his home country. His frequent writing on refugee stories and his great knowledge of the nuances of refugees’ journeys suggest that his texts are responses to a memory or real personal experience that he cannot forget. This experience mixes the painful past with the harsh realities of the present, compelling him to remember his own trauma and write about it in almost all his stories.

“Al-Mulaḥḥin” (“The Composer”) is another story that deals with the religious taboo. It narrates the story of Ja‘far al-Muṭalibi, a professional composer who becomes blasphemous after the end of the Iraq-Iran War. Ja‘far receives medals for his national songs and the president himself grants him the Courage Award more than once for his poems on the war. However, when the war ends, Ja‘far fails to compose successful songs and his status declines due to his lack of creativity. Disappointed by the loss of official recognition and his sudden fall from being a national celebrity to an ordinary man, Ja‘far finds in atheism a compensation for the power he loses and a way to get attention from people. He begins to compose new poems that attack God, the prophet, and religion. While his sons try to prevent him from showing his blasphemous songs to the public, people of the city begin to call him “the madman of the city” (24). Ja‘far’s good relationship with the government saves him from persecution, but the official negligence provokes him to increase his attack against faith. The story ends with the Kurdish uprisings of 1991 in the city of Kirkuk. A few minutes before he is caught and executed by the Kurdish insurgents, Ja‘far succeeds in broadcasting a blasphemous song on the radio.

Unlike trauma victims who lose their faith because of the atrocities of war, Ja‘far rejects religion because the war ends. His social status improves and becomes a national icon with the rise of the eight-year war: “My father had a status higher than that of the mayor and members of the local hierarchy of the party, because the president himself had more than once awarded him military medals for his songs about the *war*, songs which people remember to this day” (22). When the war ends, the need for songs that praise the sacrifices of the army and the courage of the president decreases. Consequently, Ja‘far’s poems become less popular and his role almost vanishes: “His songs were now

inappropriate. They were only broadcasting patriotic songs twice a year: on the anniversary of the outbreak of the war and the anniversary of when it *ended*” (23). Ja‘far’s attempts to convince the film and theater department to accept a documentary film about his songs fail again. The lack of recognition of the role of artists in the post war bothers Ja‘far and drives him to act in a crazy way. Since the government does not tolerate political criticism, he mocks religion instead. His inability to improve his artistic skills and adapt with the new area gives rise for an expected reaction that targets religion.

Repulsed by people for his heresy, Ja‘far decides to self-record his own songs on a tape recorder at home. He starts to record blasphemous songs with his voice and asks studios to release them for the public, trying to make “fun of religion” (23). Despite his family’s opposition and the threats he receives from some acquaintances who also call him madman, Ja‘far strangely defies everyone and proceeds with his blasphemous project by recording a tape and protecting it: “We tried to get hold of [the tape] and destroy it but ]Ja‘far] would never let it leave his coat pocket and when he went to sleep he would slip it into a special pocket he made in the pillow” (23-24).

Ja‘far’s persistence in defying his society and insulting their religious beliefs brings the attention to his work: “[Ja‘far’s] name had started to stink in the neighbourhood and in artistic circles” (23). However, this fame is limited to negative criticism and accusations of madness: “They said that Ja‘far al-Muṭalibi had gone mad, and his old friends avoided him” (23). With an oppressive system that only recognizes art which serves politics, Ja‘far finds solace in going against the flow despite the threats he receives. His offense against religion reflects a need for attention from the public and a relief for his suffering.

Ja‘far’s insistence on offending religious symbols can also be read metaphorically as a criticism against political figures. During the rule of the Baathist Party, political figures used to be beyond criticism. For instance, as in many Arab countries, the president is perceived as flawless ruler or a deity who always makes the right decision during war and peace. While blasphemy is criminalized in Iraq, criticizing politicians leads to more strict punishment that may lead to execution, murder, or imprisonment. Ja‘far probably refers to the president when he insults God and religious symbols. Moments before he is executed by the Kurdish militia, he “put the tape into the tape player and the loudspeakers started broadcasting to the insurgents his songs attacking God and existence” (25). Choosing a song that attacks God and denies His existence and broadcasting it to the public may target the regime and defy its ability to impose sovereignty over all its citizens.

A growing number of Iraqi fictional works use Iraqi characters from other religions to demonize Muslim characters. The non-Muslim figure often appears as brave, tolerant, educated, talented, and dedicated to the national cause. The rest of the characters, on the other hand, appear as violent, less educated, or cowardly. For instance, ‘Alī Badr’s *Hāris al-Tabgh*, Dunā Ghālī’s *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, Aḥmad Sa‘dāwī’s *Frānkishtāyin fī Baghdād*, and Ḥasan Balāsim’s “al-Masīḥ al-‘Irāqī” (“The Iraqi Christ”) all include non-Muslim characters who are superior to the rest of people in these works. The increasing presence of non-Muslim characters and the use of their religious identity to criticize Muslims resembles what Frantz Fanon calls the “inferiority complex” from which the colonized black man suffers. According to Fanon, the black man behaves differently with white people and considers them inherently superior, but when he deals with fellow blacks he treats them as inferior (*Black*

*Skin* 1). Comparably, several works of Iraqi terror fiction internalize the perception of Muslims as inferior because of their religious beliefs.

In “al-Masīḥ al-‘Irāqī” (“The Iraqi Christ”), Balāsīm introduces a Christian young man named Daniel, who has an unusual ability to predict dangers during the Gulf War of 1991. Serving as a medic for the Iraqi army in Kuwait, Daniel’s colleagues appreciate his ability to protect them from the air attacks of the enemies, and they feel that they only survive the Allies’ bombs because of his exceptional abilities. After the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, Daniel, who is also described as the Iraqi Christ, returns home to live with his elderly mother. While his sisters immigrated to Canada and many of his relatives left Iraq “one by one, driven away by wars and the madness of sectarian fanaticism” (Balāsīm, *The Iraqi Christ* 30), Daniel insists on staying in the country and taking care of his disabled mother. At the end of the story, Daniel dies as a martyr while visiting a restaurant to eat with his mother. A terrorist forces Daniel to wear the explosive belt and detonate himself in exchange for his mother’s life.

The narrator’s unequal descriptions of the Christian Daniel and Muslim characters in the story reflect his loss of faith in the people he belongs to. For instance, at the beginning of the story, he describes the Muslim Iraqi soldiers’ ignorance and superficiality: “The young men were monkeys. They didn’t know the truth about Daniel. They were too busy masturbating on the benches in the classrooms where the girls used to sit” (27). Daniel, on the other hand, appears as a superior man who protects his Muslim colleagues: “If it hadn’t been for his amazing powers we wouldn’t have survived. . . . Daniel could hardly be considered ordinary flesh and blood. He was a force of nature” (27). The narrator further describes other characters as cowards, weak, and naïve, and he compares them to animals:

“The soldiers, as frightened as ducklings, would follow him wherever he went. ... All we could do was dig more trenches and scamper from place to place like rats” (28). The contrast of the Christian Daniel, who is powerful and smart, with the passive and cowardly Muslims reflects the narrator’s inferiority complex and his loss of faith in his native culture. The story has many references that place Daniel on an equal level between the human and the divine just like Christ. It also dehumanizes Muslim characters and places them below the human level.

As Balāsīm usually ends his stories with their main themes, he concludes “al-Masīḥ al-‘Irāqī” with a terrifying scene that shows the Christian protagonist as a victim of a Muslim terrorist. Forced to detonate himself and kill people in the restaurant by a suicide bomber, Daniel is introduced as a victim of religious persecution. Similar to the ending of the Jewish protagonist in ‘Alī Badr’s *Ḥāris al-Tabgh*, who is murdered by Muslim militia members, the criminal here is a Muslim suicide bomber who forces Daniel to detonate himself at the end of the story. The death of Balāsīm’s hero and Badr’s protagonist show non-Muslim minorities as victims who die defending their principles at the hands of Muslim terrorists who do not differentiate between innocent people and the occupiers of their country. Daniel appears as a positive man who loves life, but his enemies are represented as murderers who appreciate death over life. While most prominent Iraqi authors, including Balāsīm, live in the West and they are aware of such issues as Islamophobia and the misrepresentations of Muslims, their works address a taboo topic in the Arab World and may perpetuate stereotypes about violence in the Middle East. The frequent references to Muslims’ violence and the focus on non-Muslim victims complicate the debate about the nature of struggle in Iraq and introduce religion as an evil force that increases violence.

Balāsīm’s “Boşalah wa Qatalah” (“The Killers and the Compass”) introduces God from the perspective of criminal characters, who describe God in a cruel way that resembles the brutality of bullies. For them, as long as a person has a power and a merciless heart, he can consider himself a god too. The narrator *Mahdī*, sixteen years old at the beginning of the story, talks about advice his bully old brother *Abū Ḥādīd* offers. For *Abū Ḥādīd*, who keeps harming vulnerable people, it is not important how long one should live, but it is necessary to use this short life to intimidate people and control them. When a man succeeds in terrorizing others, he can get what he wants from them: “People who are frightened will give you everything” (Balāsīm, *The Corpse Exhibition* 13). Before he is killed by the government, *Abū Ḥādīd*’s crimes make him well-known and feared by everyone: “People were scared senseless of my brother’s brutality. His reputation for ruthless delinquency spread throughout the city” (17).

*Abū Ḥādīd* tells his brother, who narrates the story, that he should view himself as a god. Since he understands that God severely punishes people and treats them as slaves, he should be merciless with his victims and consider them slaves as well. As a moody person, *Abū Ḥādīd* sleeps with many women, attacks the weak, and intimidates the powerful men too: “*Abū Ḥādīd* didn’t distinguish between good and evil. He had his own private demons. ... [Once] he mutilated the face of some wretched vegetable seller, simply because he was drunk and he felt like it” (17). However, he also helps oppressed people against the tyranny of the government: “Once he threw a hand grenade at the party office when ‘the comrades’ executed someone who had evaded military conscription” (17). The inability of the narrator to understand his brother’s contradictory behavior resembles people’s lack of comprehending the way that God runs the world. Equating the image of the criminals to the image of God

and giving the killers some of His attributes remove the sanctity of this topic in the story. While God is revered or at least not openly criticized in Arabic fiction, “Boşalah wa Qatalah” humanizes the image of God and blames Him for the crimes committed by people. Introducing a powerful bully who views himself as a god and mistreats people shows how people start to lose faith in religion and see themselves mistreated slaves, whose calls and prayers are unanswered by God.

In the same story, Balāsīm employs a subplot about Waḥīd, a young religious Pakistani refugee, to consolidate a theme that God does not help His servants. The narrator tells a tale that he hears from his brother *Abū Ḥādīd’s friend*. The story takes place in Northern Iran near the borders of Turkey. The sixteen-year-old boy commits suicide after being raped by six Afghani refugees while waiting for their trafficker to help them to cross the borders to Turkey on their way to Europe. The Pakistani youth is kind and religious: “He was ...[a] nice guy, young and very handsome. He spoke little Arabic, but he memorized the Qurān” (19). His father gives him a miraculous compass that he believes will protect him: “It was an army compass with the words Allah and Muhammad engraved on it. It was ... the sheikh’s holy compass, blessed by God and a conduit for his miracles. Many of the mujahideen claimed the compass turned blood-red when God intended good or evil for the person carrying it” (20). Waḥīd’s belief that the compass will make his journey safe proves to be wrong. His fellow refugee-seekers rape him, and he consequently kills himself. While at the beginning of “Boşalah wa Qatalah,” *Abū Ḥādīd* tells *Mahdī* that only weak people believe in God; the narrator includes Waḥīd’s tragedy to convince *Mahdī* that naïve people who believe in what he considers religious superstitions become victims of more powerful criminals and that is what happens to Waḥīd.



In “‘ Alf Sikīn wa Sikīn” (“A Thousand and One Knives”), Balāsīm uses the knife metaphor to criticize what his protagonist depicts as extremism in religious thought. The protagonist Ja‘far, a forty-five-year-old soccer referee who lost his legs during the Gulf War, learns a trick to make knives disappear. Loved and respected by the people who know him, Ja‘far disappears suddenly. At the end, the narrator states that terrorists kidnapped him “because he was trading in pornographic magazines” (Balāsīm, *The Corpse Exhibition* 124). In a graphic scene, the terrorists crucify Ja‘far, shoot him with bullets, drag his body to the river, and burn his corpse, chanting “‘God is most great”” (125). While the story talks about Ja‘far’s passion for soccer and his magical skills of making knives disappear, it contains very harsh criticism against religion through the metaphor of the knife. The pleasure that characters feel when they use knives and the happiness they experience by practicing magical skills are replaced with a fear of violence when religion is mentioned.

For instance, unlike the gifted characters in the story who feel that “knives could be a solace and give [their] lives the thrill of uncertainty” (110), religious traditions associate knives with wars and terror. When the narrator decides to improve his magical ability of hiding knives, the religious books he finds all seem to him to promote violence:

It was religious books that I first examined to find references to the trick. ... the Qurān, the sayings of the Prophet, stories about Heaven and Hell, and texts about prophets and infidels. ... They only had knives for jihād, for treachery, for torture and terror. Swords and blood. Symbols of desert battles and the battles of the future.

Victory banners stamped with the name of God, and knives of war. (116-17)

The narrator reduces the references to knives in the Islamic tradition to violence, death, war and excludes any reference to other uses. Comparably, he reads Arabic and foreign books of

literature and philosophy that deal with the mystery of knives, but he never associates them with violence or crimes. The terrifying scene of Ja‘far’s execution by extremists consolidates the knife metaphor that links religion to violence.

Balāsīm’s stories are replete with references to sectarian violence in Iraq, especially during the year 2006. Although the last decade gave rise to multiple Iraqi writers who depicted the sectarian differences between the Shiites and Sunnis, their works contained only some allusions to the bloody sectarian clash and often avoid mentioning the names of well-known figures. Despite offering only a brief account for a complicated struggle, Iraqi writers began to address a topic that has been a taboo throughout the modern history of Iraq.

Balāsīm’s stories, however, treat this taboo differently. First, unlike works such as Duná Ghālī’s *Manāzil al-Waḥshah*, Sinān Anṭūn’s *Waḥdahā Shajarat al-Rummān (The Corpse Washer)*, and ‘Alī Badr’s *Hāris al-Tabgh*, which briefly refer to the sectarian violence, Balāsīm focuses on the bloody clash between sects in a more explicit way.<sup>14</sup> He sometimes mentions such Sunni groups as *al-Qaeda* and Shiite militias as al-Mahdī army by name. While some terror fiction writers consider religious figures and the interpretation of religion as potential sources of terror, in “‘Alf Sikīn wa Sikīn,” “al- Mulaḥḥin,” and “al-Arshīf wal-Wāqī,” for instance, Balāsīm attacks religion per se and insults religious symbols as well.

Unlike writers in Egypt and most Arab countries, whose voices are strictly muffled especially when addressing the religious taboo, Iraqi writers of terror fiction succeed in addressing the topic effectively. The collapse of the regime in 2003 and the emergence of weak governments that fail to impose complete censorship helped alleviate the restrictions.

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<sup>14</sup> Sinān Anṭūn self-translated his novel *Waḥdahā Shajarat al-Rummān* (literally meaning “Only the Pomegranate Tree”) as *The Corpse Washer*.

The fact that the majority of renowned Iraqi writers live in Western countries removes the fear of persecution and allows them to write freely compared to their counterparts in Iraq. The accessibility of the internet and the relative ease in reaching a wider audience online without the need of permission from governments offers an opportunity for writers to deal with these topics without the same restrictions. For instance, the ban imposed on Balāsīm's works in several Arab countries led him to publish his stories online. It is probably much easier to find translated copies of Balāsīm's works in Helsinki's libraries than in Baghdad. But the most important factors in the rapid spread of works that break the religious taboo in Iraq is the loss of faith caused by the trauma of war which caused disastrous consequences as well as the increasing resentment among young writers toward the alliance between religion and politics, which is often employed to incite sectarian violence in *post-US-occupation Iraq*.

### **Sexual Obscenity in Aḥmad Nāḥī's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* (*The Use of Life*)**

Unlike religion, which is still hard to criticize openly in Egypt, sex has become a topic that epitomizes Egyptian writers' loss of faith in conservative traditions. Since the feelings of distress and anger have drastically escalated after the Arab Spring, vulgar language full of sexual content appeared in terror fiction, serving as a verbal relief of the trauma that people experience daily. As is the case in many Arab societies, sexual insults and obscene expressions are widely used among the Egyptian public to express immediate feelings of anger and disappointment. While it is not often taken seriously as it is considered an emotional reaction, the excessive use of swearing and insulting by choosing language replete with sexual images and impolite expressions is not very common in Arabic literature.

Even such notorious poets as Aḥmad Maṭṭar and Muḏaffar al-Nawāb, who are well-known for using sexual metaphors usually choose expressions that only target political figures, and their sexual content is relatively limited and not as obscene as terror fiction works. The use of sexual material discussed in this chapter does not deal with love and romantic relations, but rather a vulgar language deemed disgusting by accepted standards of morality and decency. It focuses on sexual images and expressions that degrade human beings and place them in a status equal to beasts. Most importantly, it appears as a symptom of trauma that forces characters to react using obscene expressions.

Traumatic events such as the Arab Spring can be a trigger for regression. As an unconscious emotional defense mechanism, regression involves an experience in which “the person attempts to return to an earlier phase of functioning to avoid the tension and conflict evoked at the present level of development” (Kaplan et al. 251). Freud explains that regression “translates our thoughts into a primitive form of expression; but it also revives the characteristics of our primitive mental life” (Freud and Strachey 262). Trying to avoid the “unsatisfactory reality,” the human’s thoughts resort to the repressed sexual impulses:

This regression appears to be a twofold one: a *temporal* one, in so far as the libido, the erotic needs, hark back to stages of development that are earlier in time, and a *formal* one, in that the original and primitive methods of psychical expression are employed in manifesting those needs. Both these kinds of regression, however, lead back to childhood and unite in bringing about an infantile condition of sexual life.

(*Complete Psychological Works* 49)

The use of sexual language is a defense mechanism that allows the authors to return to socially repressed desires. While anger is a common reaction to trauma, regression leads

writers of terror fiction to resort to verbal sexual expressions to relieve their trauma. Thus, this section reads the phenomenon of breaking the sexual taboo in Arabic terror fiction as a symptom of trauma.

Aḥmad Nājī's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* best represents how the phenomenon of using obscene sexual content has been flourishing in the context of Arab's trauma. Setting the events in the future, the narrator tells that one day in July, the residents of Cairo wake up to find their city completely buried under sand. Calling this disaster the "Tsunami of the Desert," the residents begin to recover only to witness a series of earthquakes in September that they call the "Great Quake." After these traumatic events that take place within two months, the narrator includes several scenes of sexual images and expressions to introduce a city doomed to an apocalyptic ending. While the novel depicts a gloomy picture of the stressful life all the residents of Cairo live, the plot is built on the individual story of Bassām, who finds himself in city that oppresses its residents with social taboos and political conspiracies. The unsuccessful love story of Bassām and Rīm and their sudden separation show that relationships in Cairo are destined to fail. The mysterious role of the powerful Parpika, whose name is spelled similar to the word Amrīka (the Arabic for America), can be read allegorically as a metaphor of the secret plans of the United States to create a new Middle East.

*Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* contains multiple shocking sexual scenes that heated the debate in the media about the limits of freedom of expression. Accused of violating the codes of ethics and conventions, the novel caused an unprecedented controversy in Egypt regarding what a verbal offense is. When *Akḥbār al-Adab* (*News of Literature*), one of the most widely distributed literary magazines in the Arab World, published excerpts from *Istikhdām al-*

*Ḥayāh* the reception of the novel was controversial as some critics had the courage to support Nājī's bold language and others chose to attack him harshly. Consequently, an Egyptian reader filed a complaint against Nājī and *Akḥbār al-Adab*, accusing them of including a "sexually explicit content" in a state-run newspaper. While the case seemed absurd at the beginning as the novel did not focus on sex as a major theme, the court took the complaint seriously. It sentenced Nājī to a maximum of two years in prison and ordered the magazine to pay a fine of 10,000 Egyptian pounds. Although Nājī was released after ten months due to an international campaign of solidarity, this case "marks the first time in modern Egypt that an author has been jailed for a work of fiction" (Koerber vi).

According to the citizen who filed the complaint, he suffered a "'drop in blood pressure' after encountering the text's sexually explicit language" (vii). He believes that the publication of such a novel is dangerous and *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* should not enter one's home especially if children are exposed to the sexual material it contains. Nājī, on the other hand, believes that a fictional writer should have the freedom to write about anything:

So they think it's like my personal confessions. These things about fiction, the prosecution didn't get it until now. So, for example, they are accusing me as if I were the fictional character in the novel. Whatever the fictional character is doing in the novel, the prosecution is dealing with it as if it were my personal confessions. If the court gives us a verdict and if the court agrees that this is literature, this is a novel, I think this will have a huge effect on the freedom of expression in Egypt. (qtd. in Gibbons 5)

Regardless of the two opposing opinions about the limits of freedom of speech and the actual impacts of the sexual content on the reader, the novel introduces a new literary mode of

verbal sexual expressions. This mode resembles the way that angry or disappointed people speak. It intends to make the expressions as vulgar and close to the reader who usually hear them in the streets.

Although the first chapter of the novel begins with a short section that describes two traumatic natural disasters that hit the city of Cairo, it contains a sex scene that introduces contradictory feelings. While the very beginning of the narrative shocks the readers with scenes of destruction caused by the “Tsunami of the Desert” and the “Great Quake,” it also surprises the readers with sexual *intercourse between* the protagonist Bassām and Rīm immediately after the scene of destruction: “Watching the slow, dark burn gave me a tingle on my cock, which I put out with a scratch. I smiled as she passed me the joint and stretched out in front of me. Her nipples stood out from under her t-shirt, and her soft-spoken thighs spread apart, giving off wafts of a pungent perfume” (Nājī 6). At first sight, reading this scene of explicit sexual images seems an optimistic reference to the love of life that the Cairene citizens espouse. However, sex has nothing to do with romance or optimism in Egyptian dystopian fiction. Mentioning the words “cock,” “nipples,” “thighs” reduces sex into a temporary physical attraction devoid of any emotional connection. It becomes more obscene when the narrator avoids any reference to the intellectual qualities of Rīm.

Rīm’s act of leaving the bed and sleeping in the hallway with her dog after having sex shows that sex for her is nothing more than a temporary relief and she does not truly love Bassām. When they end sex, Bassām and Rīm return to their previous selves. Their sexual intercourse is only a short moment to mitigate their shattered selves and fractured bonds with others. After seeing her sleeping alone in the hallway, Bassām admits that his relationship with Rīm is doomed and that staying with her after having sex is meaningless: “there was no

reason for me to be here, since my presence clearly caused some kind of disturbance in her world. Why else would she have left me to sleep alone on the sofa?” (7). While Bassām and Rīm’s relationship is not romantic, sex obviously functions as a temporary comfort and an opportunity for them to forget their stress and trauma. In fact, Rīm for Bassām “was someone [he] had absolutely no feelings for” (8). Nājī’s choice to begin the story of his main characters with a scene of sexual intercourse is not only employed to provide a moment of calmness after introducing two natural disasters that destroy Cairo, but it is also utilized to expose the fragility of the *Cairenes* who succumb to their sexual impulses.

Despite bringing Bassām together temporarily with Rīm, who is eight years his senior, sex is also used in an obscene manner to insult Rīm. Bassām’s regression translates his thought into an obscene language that demeans women. This state of regression appears when Bassām argues with Rīm about trivial topics. For instance, in their last night together, they were listening to music, and Rīm made a statement that “music died in the seventies” (9). Bassām expresses his disagreement in an offensive language that disdains Rīm and treats her as an inferior other: “‘Like hell it did,’ I shot back. ‘Can you show me its grave? Where’s the graveyard of music? Where’s the holy shrine of music that houses its goddamn holy corpse? Answer me this, O cruel diva: Where is the graveyard of music?’” (9). While Benjamin Koerber’s English translation is not literal and it only conveys the general meaning, the original text is very sexually offensive. Koerber translates “ṭizik qar’a” (literally means your ass is hairless) as “‘Like hell it did,’ I shot back” (9). While the English translation conveys the message, it does not show the degree of anger and obscenity. The use of “ṭizik qar’a” for no obvious reason in this context is primitive and disrespectful, especially when addressing a woman. It can only reflect a state of regression that Bassām experiences.



He expresses this feeling with the use of a rude sexual expression that only provides him with a temporary relief at the expense of his relationship with Rīm, which ends soon thereafter because of that incident.

In addition to the use of sexual scenes and expressions to relieve his stress and depict his failed relationships with his fellow humans, the narrator uses sexual metaphors to describe his suffering in the city to which he moves. Similar to Cairo, which causes trauma to its residents, 6<sup>th</sup> of October City brings pity and depression to Bassām. In a footnote, Nājī uses a strange comparison between the small 6<sup>th</sup> of October City and the large Cairo in terms of the negativity they both share: “At the time, 6<sup>th</sup> of October had not yet become its own province, let alone the bustling port city of today. October was still a suckling child feeding off the sperm, smoke, and fire of Cairo’s sizzling teat” (8). Although this sexual metaphor is uncommon in Arabic literature, it is eloquent as the “sperm” in this context reflects the filthiness of the city. Combining “sperm,” which is sometimes associated with life and productivity, with “fire” and “smoke,” which symbolize destruction, introduces a very complex image of the location. The sexual symbol “sperm” does not here represent life and productivity, but means dirt and impurity. Thus, the use of an uncommon disgusting sexual image to describe the place in which Bassām lives in reflects the sense of trauma and depression he experiences.

In chapter six, the narrator views sex as the antidote of the trauma that Cairo causes.<sup>15</sup> Despite the stressful life that the city imposes on its residents: “For all that Cairo takes from its residents, it gives nothing in return” (118), sex becomes the only choice that people seek in order to compensate for their losses: “In this city, you’ll be lucky if you can get over your

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<sup>15</sup> Chapter six is the controversial chapter that causes Nājī to be jailed.

sexual tension, and appreciate sex as just one of the many facets of a friendship. Otherwise, your horniness will make you a testy bitch” (119). Since Bassām realizes that drugs are not sufficient to heal the trauma of the young people of Cairo: “After a while, taking drugs clearly got old. Or they were just not enough. And if one of us ever gave in to total addiction, his life would be over in a few months: this we know by trial and experience” (118), one can achieve a sense of comfort through sex.

Sex in this context is not the intimate relationship that people seek to strengthen their bonds with the people they love. It is a form of primitive desire that comes as a response to the consequences of trauma, and it is linked to an unrestrainable degree of lust for the body of a partner. In a party with a group of friends, Bassām receives a question from a German girl about the activities that “typical twentysomethings ... do in Cairo” to overcome the traumatizing life in the city (118). This question engenders other questions in the narrator’s mind about the significance of sexual fetish. In a stream of consciousness, Bassām asks himself about the youth of Cairo: “Might they go for pupil licking? Are they into eating pussy? Do they like to suck cock, or lick dirt, or snort hash mixed with sleeping pills? Or one might ask how long it would take for any of these fetishes to lose its thrill. Are they good for life?” (118). By asking these taboo questions, Bassām reduces sex into a temporary physical pleasure that does not recognize the value of emotions.

Although Bassām meets the German girl accidentally, Nājī describes their sexual intercourse in detail to introduce his readers with an uncommon scene of sexual fetish. With a special focus on non-genital parts of the girl’s body such as her toes and knees, Nājī depicts how his protagonist’s sexual interest deviates from the norm: “I lifted her dress above her knees and slid to the floor. Nestling between her legs, I lifted up her foot and started licking

her big toe. I walked my tongue in gentle taps along her leg until I reached her knee, which I pummeled with kisses” (120). Known as partialism, this type of sexual intercourse is classified as a fetishistic disorder according to the fifth edition of *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (700-701).<sup>16</sup> While there is a high focus on non-genital parts in this sexual intercourse and thus considered paraphilic disorder, Nājī also includes explicit details on non-paraphilic behavior, turning his description into a pornographic material that is widely viewed as inappropriate for publication in state-run magazines.

Regardless of the public reception of the sexual material in *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, Nājī’s fragmented sexual scenes reflect the crisis of trauma that his characters experience. Having this fetish experience with a foreign girl from Germany after he failed in his relationship with a local girl such as Rīm is meant to compensate for the lack of intimacy that Cairo imposes on its residents. Like other traumatized Egyptian youth who seek to fight the misery that surrounds them, the protagonist finds in fetishism a feeling of power that he lacks in his everyday life. Since the socio-political and economic circumstances in modern Cairo suffocate people, playing the role of dominant sexual partner in a fetish scene may provide a temporary feeling of control for the protagonist. Breaking the sexual taboo and including controversial explicit images in minor scenes that do not affect the main plot presents the readers with a complicated task of figuring out the relationship between sex and a main theme in the novel such as using all sources of life to build a completely ruined city after traumatic events.

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<sup>16</sup> *DSM-5* defines fetishistic disorder as: “using nonliving objects or having a highly specific focus on nongenital body parts” (701)

Traumatized characters in Arabic terror fiction often lose their sense of belonging to a location and the idea of nation. Their rapport with home becomes a relationship of *daḥiya* (victim) and *jalād* (perpetrator of trauma). This traumatizing relationship obliges characters to use a language that breaks political, religious, and sexual taboos. For instance, the narrator of *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* uses offensive sexual insults to describe his homeland. Because “the country dumbed [him] and broke [his] heart,” (155), the narrator’s “relationship with Egypt became strained” (155). Giving an example of Gawaboura, a young man full of “patriotism and passion for change” (154), the narrator explains that Gawaboura’s tongue would change and describe Egypt with sexual insults such as “fuck this country and her mother” (154). For the narrator, Cairo becomes a place for hatred, misery, and despair. As he thinks “Cairo had reached a point beyond repair” (42), he objects any project to save the country. Instead, he uses sexual insults again to express his frustration: “Let Cairo go fuck herself, morning afternoon and evening, today and tomorrow and forever” (37). Indeed, the narrator does not find a more eloquent way to describe his loss of belonging to the space than using vulgar language full of offensive sexual expressions.

While the novel does not address the religious beliefs of its characters, it shows a loss of faith in social traditions. Since the social institution in Egypt fails to intervene to prevent the trauma that people live, there is a sense of anger directed at the traditional values of the societies. Traumatized characters in terror fiction express their loss of faith in the social values by violating the normative morality or what is called *adab*. To revenge the societal failure to protect them, they often use a language imbued with meanings that contradict with the *adab*. As a long-held taboo, sex becomes the favorite and most influential metaphor people use to achieve a quick reaction and get wider attentions. However, the use of sexual

images and expressions does not bring permeant relief to the characters, but rather shatters the relationship between the victims of trauma and their sense of security and puts them in an open confrontation with their societies.

In the context of trauma, the boundaries between realistic and sarcastic portrayals of the power of sex are effaced. In his description of the Egyptian woman of today, the narrator reduces their power to their sexual influence. After listing a few strange characteristics that distinguish the Egyptian woman, the narrator focuses on how they dominate society by virtue of their sexual traits: “The Egyptian woman of today is known to be beautiful, despite having only a single breast. She dislikes sharing personal information, but enjoys gossip. Power gives her a sexual jolt that bursts forth from her pussy and turns everyone around her into junkyard dogs submissive to her will” (74). Although it is hard to tell if Nājī criticizes the Egyptian woman or mocks the perception of her role by patriarchal society, the sexual description is offensive. Not only the Egyptian woman is a half feminine by having a single breast, but she is talkative and relies on sex to dominate men, who are also introduced as submissive dogs. Similar to many instances of sexism in the novel, this disrespectful depiction shows a prejudice against the Egyptian woman and perpetuates the trauma of one half of the Egyptian society (see fig. 3.1.).



Fig.3.1. *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* uses many illustrations done by Ayman al-Zorkany. This figure represents the Egypt women of today. Notice that the woman has very slim arms and only one breast to imply that she is sexually incapable, an illustration that opposes the narrator's description of the sexual domination practiced by the Egypt women of today (Nājī 74).

It is worth mentioning that the narrator uses offensive sexual expressions to describe almost all characters and places in the novel. While this use of sexual language is sarcastic in many cases, it is also Nājī's way to dramatize the frustration of his narrator. Using obscene language successfully directs the attention to this novel and the misery of its characters. In

the translator's note, Benjamin Koerber admits that the work may not be suitable for everyone. He adds that many sexual expressions in the original text have layers of meanings that should only be understood within their culture and can be lost in the translation:

[I]t is inevitable that certain images or expressions may not fit comfortably with everyone's tastes. In this respect, the reader is urged to bear in mind that certain words in the novel's vocabulary—e.g., “balls” (*bidan*), “ass-kissing” (*ta'ris*), and “cocksuckery” (*khawlana*)—have a different sort of currency, and inhabit a somewhat different web of associations, in the Arabic original. Moreover, while such words are certainly marks of an “attitude,” their transposition into a foreign idiom will make it difficult to draw wholly accurate assumptions about a speaker's social status, intelligence, or political leanings. (ix)

While the novel is rich in terms of its sexual terminologies, one needs to be thoroughly immersed in Egyptian slang to capture their connotations. However, the use of all these terms in the novel is associated with the context of trauma and the attempts to find a psychological relief.

In addition to the dominant heterosexual scenes that *Istikhdām al-Hayāh* and other terror fiction works include, scenes of homosexual relationships sometimes appear as well. These homosexual relationships often offer a deceptive compensation for failing heterosexual experiences. For instance, after Rīm breaks up with Bassām, she finally finds herself in an unplanned relationship with Paprika, a mysterious woman who supervises the project of rebuilding Cairo: “When she got naked for the first time with Paprika, and the bitch stuck her tongue in her pussy, she cried” (170). This homosexual relationship is unequal as Paprika is a powerful woman who imposes her vision on her employees. Rīm is pushed to have sex with

her supervisor, seeking to defy the hegemonic rule of her society, which decides the nature of relationships, and to relieve the trauma of her past heterosexual experiences.

The narrator describes the struggles that Rīm lives and that lead her to begin an elusive homosexual relationship with the authoritative Paprika. She accepts that relationship because she “had reached that point of despair where illusion was the only hope. Her entire life had been a series of impulsive love affairs and long flirtations with belief, interrupted by brief but potent revolutions of doubt and disappointment” (171). Although she feels guilty about her homosexuality, Rīm “sought revenge for her rebellion against the dictates of family and religion. Their presence could be felt in the hypocrisies of society, in the infidelities of loved ones, in her rumbling storms of depression and anxiety” (170-71). While briefly described in the novel, homosexuality comes as a form of defiance to the society that restricts people’s freedom. This defiance begins with a series of impulsive feelings that reject the societal beliefs followed by a doubt “with God and religion” (171). The impulsive feelings reach their apex when Rīm begins a homosexual relationship with Paprika, who is mysterious, authoritative, and a foreigner. Hence, the presence of homosexuality has nothing to do with sexual desires or a freedom to choose a sexual orientation, but it comes as a strike back against a set of hegemonic social rules that imposes restrictions on people and perpetuates the trauma they survive.

Prostitution is one of the recurring themes in Arabic works of terror fiction. Unlike *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*’s brief reference to this taboo, Muḥammad Rabī‘’s *Uṭārid* talks about it in detail. The figure of the prostitute appears in many modern Arabic texts such as the works of Najīb Maḥfūz, Yūsuf Idrīs, and Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, but the topic of prostitution gained more popularity in terror fiction. Prostitution becomes a more complicated phenomenon that



is often associated with an individual or collective sense of trauma. While Farīda's acts of prostitution are discussed in the previous chapter as an allegory of the national decline in Egypt, they can also be interpreted as a search for power by a traumatized people. Farīda and other female prostitutes sell their bodies to gain money from male customers who seek short relationships devoid of true love and responsibility. The traumatized prostitute goes against the dictates of her society and uses her body as she wishes, and the male customer sleeps with a socially degraded woman to overcome the overwhelming rules imposed by the society. By embracing prostitution openly despite its negative social implications, characters often express their rejection of the traditional rules and the social beliefs that keep them captive to the trauma and frustration they encounter every day.

Sex is also used in terror fiction to induce feelings of fear and disgust. The pain that readers are supposed to feel when reading about a sexual scene in terror fiction resembles some aspects of the actual traumatic experiences. Rape is one of the sexual motives that appear in some works of terror fiction. In 'Uṭārid, for instance, the narrator recounts the story of two very young homeless sisters, who are frequently raped. In one scene, they are raped by a group of powerful young men: "Each and every one of them went into the little house and did as he pleased, raping the older girl, who submitted to them all, while the young one in the corner mostly hid her eyes" (223). Although the scenes of rape are often read as a metaphor of the declining situation and the weakness of people in the Arab world, the repetitiveness of these graphic moments of sexual assaults is Rabī's way to express intense experiences of terror and trauma. The feeling of shame that the sisters experience because of the sexual assaults they survived parallel the moments of humiliation that people feel after their freedom is usurped by military generals. Thus, for many Arab readers, the rape scenes

create ambivalent feelings of sympathy for the victims along with fear and revulsion from the political realities that mimic the sexual assaults itself.

### **The Political Taboo in Terror Fiction**

The relationship between Arabic writers and politics is controversial, and it does not always reflect a genuine engagement with the political realities in the Arab World. According to Thurayā al-Rayyis, a scholar of Middle Eastern politics, *Arabic literature is* “a victim of authoritarianism. It isn’t much of an exaggeration to describe the Arab literary scene as something like an incestuous village run by the cultural henchmen of Arab regimes – dodgy money and politicized networks of nepotism” (Bustānī et al.). The Jordanian author Hishām Bustānī harshly criticizes the majority of Arab writers and describes them as “usually lame, opportunistic, self-censored...therefore their ‘creative work’ lacks creativity, and ... the majority are of the ‘annexed’ type: annexed to the regimes, or annexed to their ‘inferiority complex’ regarding ‘the west’” (Bustānī et al.). While al-Rayyis *and* Bustānī criticize the literary elite in the Arab World and consider literature a victim of totalitarianism, al-Rayyis *points out that there is a* “small minority of independent-minded writers who push literary boundaries by experimenting with language and literary form and by breaking social, religious and political taboos” (Bustānī et al.). Based on al-Rayyis *and* Bustānī’s criteria, the new generation of Arabic terror fiction writers probably belong to the minority of authors who defy the restrictions imposed by their totalitarian regimes.

Writing about the three taboos is often interconnected. When writers address politics, they often deal with religion, sex, or other taboos and vice versa. For instance, Nājī’s

*Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* used sex as a motif and rarely talks about politics, but it is “deeply political precisely because it doesn’t talk about politics” (Guyer). In terror fiction, breaking the political taboos does not only happen because of the lack of censorship or the need to please publication companies which usually prefer works that address the political debates from a rebellious perspective. The flourishing of writings that address political topics went hand in hand with the development of the status of victimhood that people have been claiming during the last decade. Hence, the political topics addressed in this section have a common thread tied to the traumatic situation in the Arab World. While the taboos of religion and sex do not appear in all works as writers choose to focus on different themes, politics appear strongly in almost every work either in explicit expressions or in allegorical images.

The representations of Jews as victims of political oppression is a taboo topic in Modern Arabic literature. Because of the Arab-Israeli conflict, very few works of fiction, such as Ghassān Kanafānī’s *Returning to Haifa*, humanize Jews and talk about their sufferings. As a political taboo, Arabic writers often avoid depicting Jews as victims because they fear the accusations of treachery or normalization with Israel, which they still consider an illegal state that occupies Palestinian land and persecutes its innocent civilians. ‘Alī Badr’s *Ḥāris al-Tabgh (The Tobacco Keeper)* makes a distinction between the Jewish population in the Arab World and the Israelis. *Ḥāris al-Tabgh*, as mentioned in chapter 2, introduces a Jewish Iraqi protagonist and sheds light on the trauma of Baghdadi Jews during the 1940s. By introducing a minor incident that took place in the first half of the twentieth century and dramatizing its consequences on modern Iraq: “All subsequent civil strife in Baghdad may be traced back to what happened on that fateful day in 1941” (Badr 117), Badr

breaks a political taboo and urges for more attention to the trauma of minorities in the Arab World.

Regardless of Badr's motivation for introducing a controversial topic such as the claims to victimhood and trauma that the Jews of Baghdad survived before they moved to Israel, his work brings a new perspective to Arab readers and invites a rereading of history from a different perspective. Badr's approach brings the history of Jews and Muslims together as victims of trauma. While many Arab authors avoided writing about this taboo as they thought it could put them in confrontation with Arab readers and authorities, Badr's novel proved the opposite and helped readers understand that the remembrance of the oppression of Iraqi Jews does not erase the memory of the Iraqi Muslims' trauma. This, indeed, goes along with Michael Rothberg's theory of "multidirectional memory," in which he states, "[t]he fact that today the Holocaust is frequently set against global histories of racism, slavery, and colonialism in an ugly contest of comparative victimization ... is part of a refusal to recognize the earlier conjunction of these histories" (*Multidirectional Memory* 7). Thus, the openness of Badr's novel to the trauma of minorities does not compete with the memories of the majority's suffering or exclude it, but it puts their trauma "in dialogue with the dynamic transformations and multifaceted struggles that define the era of decolonization" (7).

The topic of terrorism, on the other hand, brings political and religious taboos together. While terrorism is often associated with the religious beliefs of the person who carries out the attacks, many instances of terrorism in terror fiction introduce a different perspective. Terrorism is linked to a traumatic reenactment in which the perpetrator appears as a victim who avenges the humiliation, torture, or misery he receives. Diane Perlman's

analysis of the psychology of terrorism explains this underrepresented perspective. For her, terrorism is linked to intolerable conditions of trauma that produce internal changes in the psychology of people:

Failure to respond to repeated trauma, humiliation and suffering produces utter hopelessness. When cries for help are not heeded, people are plunged into the depths of despair – an abyss that creates a change in personality. When appropriate methods of trying to get help do not work, people resort to deviant, destructive measures to receive attention, relief of suffering, and justice. (19)

Perlman adds that terrorism involves a traumatic reenactment that enables the terrorist to “reserve their roles as victims to become masters of their fate” (19). Several works of terror fiction consolidate this analysis and introduce terrorists as victims of bitter circumstances, a perspective that is considered taboo as it may be misunderstood or interpreted as a sympathy toward terrorism.

Balāsīm’s “Shāḥinat Birlīn” (“The Truck to Berlin”) corresponds with Perlman’s analysis. Although he lives in Europe and his text can be wrongly interpreted as justification for terrorism, Balāsīm introduces a new perspective that explains some motives for terrorist attacks. While the story does not show any acts of terrorism, it ends when a traumatized refugee becomes a wolf, a metaphorical ending that can be interpreted as if the man transforms into a violent terrorist. “Shāḥinat Birlīn” narrates the story of thirty-five young Iraqis who make a deal with a Turkish smuggler to “carry them in a closed truck exporting tinned fruit from Istanbul to Berlin” (Balāsīm, *The Madman* 70). After driving three nights, the truck stopped suddenly, and the young men tried to open the truck door, but they could not succeed. After four days of the truck’s sudden stop, the Serbian policemen found the

abandoned truck. When they “opened the back door of the truck a young man soaked in blood jumped down from inside and ran like a madman towards the forest. The police chased him but he disappeared into the vast forest. In the truck there were thirty-four bodies” (75). While the bodies of the thirty-four men had become “a large soggy mass of flesh, blood and shit” (75), a Serbian policeman tells his wife about the surviving man, saying that he ““turned into a grey wolf, before he vanished”” (75).

From the beginning of the story, the narrator refers to the challenges that the refugees and asylum seekers face in their journeys to Europe. Besides the financial abuses, the refugees who reach Europe are subject to mistreatment and humiliation from the hosting governments and their media. Not only do the unempathetic media perpetuate negative stereotypes about them, but they do also ignore the suffering of the refugees and only focus on tragedies that attract attention and bring commercial success. The European media only cover tragic stories of drowning and disregard the horrors and the trauma of other refugee stories because “such mass drownings are an enjoyable film scene, like a new Titanic” (70). The media also neglects the brutality of the policemen in the hosting countries, which may further the trauma of the immigrants and motivate them to retaliate:

[Y]ou do not read stories about what the armies of European democracies do when at night, in a vast forest, they catch a group of terrified humans, drenched in rain, hungry and cold. I have seen how the Bulgarian police beat a young Pakistani with a spade until he lost consciousness. Then in the bitterest cold they asked us all to get into a river that was almost frozen over. That was before they handed us over to the Turkish army. (70)

Balāsīm's perspective here shifts the ethical responsibility of the refugee crisis to the European governments, which usually exaggerate their role in protecting human rights. "Shāḥinat Birlīn" can also be read as an example of David Morris's concept of "moral communities," in which he argues that the West often does not recognize the trauma of people outside the Western moral community (40). Furthermore, by emphasizing the need for a more humanitarian treatment of refugees, Balāsīm's perspective reinforces Judith Butler's statement about the necessity of recognizing "the shared precariousness" of all people in the globe (28).

Balāsīm ends "Shāḥinat Birlīn" with a very powerful metaphorical image that can be viewed as a normal result for the marginalization of the refugees' sufferings. After he runs off the truck toward the forest, the surviving refugee turns into a predatory animal. The Serbian policeman says to his wife: "'I'm not mad, woman. I tell you for the thousandth time. As soon as the man reached the forest he started to run on all fours, then turned into a grey wolf, before he vanished'" (Balāsīm, *The Madman* 75). This unusual image of a human being transforming into a wild animal symbolizes his transformation from a peaceful man into a terrorist or what is called a "lone wolf," who acts violently without a guidance from a terrorist group.

Although the ending scene would not have been controversial if it were written by an author living in the Arab World, "Shāḥinat Birlīn" breaks a political taboo as Balāsīm lives in Europe. Before he gained Finnish citizenship, Balāsīm himself was a refugee and had a very difficult journey as an illegal immigrant. Many Arab authors who live in European countries do not criticize the policies of Western states to avoid being labelled as sympathizing with terrorism or unthankful for the humanitarian help that they receive in Europe when their

home governments persecute them. Other authors also exaggerate their praise to the humanitarian aid they receive to show themselves as thankful citizens who deserve the help or because of their “‘inferiority complex’ regarding ‘the west,’” to use Hishām Bustānī’s words (Bustānī et al).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as much as Balāsīm’s image is powerful and genuine, his use of the wolf metaphor, which symbolizes the terrorist, introduces terrorism as an act of revenge for humiliation and suffering. It explains the consequences of the failure to respond to the repeated trauma that the refugees live, which Diane Perlman’s analysis warns of.

Although the fall of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn’s regime and the overthrow of Ḥosnī Mubārak did not bring freedom or democracy to the people of Iraq and Egypt, these violent changes encouraged writers to break the fear barriers and dedicate their literary works to criticize political figures openly. Terror fiction writers transcend the allegorical criticism that previous writers relied on, finding in their explicit attacks against their rulers an effective way to release their cumulative trauma. The protagonist in *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, for instance, attributes the lack of political engagement in Egypt to the exclusion imposed by the president of Egypt: “Direct political action was out of the question as long as the General was in power” (37). Similarly, Rabī’s *Uṭārid* focuses on the inefficiency of the new president, who comes from a military background:

And though no one knew who this General al-Gamali was, all rejoiced because an Egyptian would be ruling Egypt once again; and when we saw him, short and squat ... we smiled the smile of those who catch sight of their beloved child—weak and

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<sup>17</sup> The protagonist in Ḥasan Balāsīm’s “Kāwābīs Carlos Fuentes” (“The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes”) shows an example of this inferiority complex to the West. As a refugee, Salim changes his Arabic name to Carlos; learns Dutch and refuses to speak Arabic anymore; keeps lauding the advancement of Holland and backwardness of Iraq; disdains his language, culture, and people; and wishes that all refugees except him be expelled to their original countries.



flawed, but beloved ... The man was the least among us, and it seemed that we were simply waiting for someone to lead our country—anyone. (273)

Despite not mentioning him by name, the text obviously describes the current president of Egypt and criticizes his lack of qualifications to lead the country. The sarcastic description of the physical flaws of the General and his intellectual inefficiency present an old critique of the figure of the dictator in the Arab World. It contradicts the typical attributes that are usually given to the Arab military rulers such as being infallible, protectors of the nation, wise, heroes, and god-like figures.

In most Arab countries, criticizing the army, the military institution, or the nation itself is a taboo that only traitors break. Regardless of the individuals' corruptions or mistakes, a good citizen should love and support the armed forces and the nation. However, both Egyptian and Iraqi works of terror fiction destabilize these notions and question the very idea of patriotism. Viewing unconditional love of homeland as a blind faith that hides political issues, the protagonist in *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* curses his city using obscene sexual expressions: "Let Cairo go fuck herself, morning afternoon and evening; today and tomorrow and forever" (37). He uses the same vulgar language to express his loss of belonging to Egypt: "Fuck this country and her mother" (154). Along similar line, the defeats of the Egyptian armed forces, their alleged corruption, and the greed for power and the brutality that their top leaders show after the revolution are all addressed in *Uṭārid*: "Prior to the evacuation, we were killing people as part of a master plan, which, as you have seen, succeeded. But your recent killings are meaningless, motiveless. I can't understand why you're doing it" (313). Thus, Egyptian terror fiction breaks these national taboos and reveals

the fragility of this imposed sense of patriotism, reflecting an increasing sense of resentment among the people of Egypt.

Similarly, in Iraqi fiction, Balāsīm's constant negative depiction of the armed forces transcends the typical description of the persecution practiced by Ṣaddām's army against its citizens and the neighboring countries. In Balāsīm's stories, the Iraqi soldiers are not heroes and their alleged victories are illusions. During the Gulf War, the Iraqi soldiers were "as frightened as ducklings. ... [They weren't able to] ... fire a single shot back. [and] All [they] could do was dig more trenches and scamper from place to place like rats" ("al-Masīḥ al-'Irāqī" 28). While this description dehumanizes the Iraqi soldiers and introduces them as cowardly villains, other stories seek to remove the status of respect that the military institution has gained during Ṣaddām's reign. By using humiliating descriptions of the Iraqi military institution, Balāsīm's narrative equates the violent acts of the top leaders of the Iraqi regime and the soldiers who just follow orders. Indeed, Balāsīm's controversial perspective against the Iraqi army serves as an invitation for the Iraqis to suspend their belief in their military institution, which has been frequently accused of oppressing its people and failing in wars against foreign enemies.

The study of taboos in Arabic literature has often been taboo itself. The lack of studies in this phenomenon increases mysteries, consolidates stereotypes and generalities, and oversimplifies the socio-political factors that led authors to defy the norms and address prohibited topics. In linking the phenomenon of breaking religious, sexual, and political taboos in terror fiction to trauma studies, this chapter extends the discussion of this controversial topic and goes beyond the oversimplified interpretations that often reduce this rebellious movement to issues of censorship and translation preferences. Authors such as

Ḥasan Balāsīm and Aḥmad Nājī have been victims of trauma themselves and their unconventional works, which defy the literary norms in the Arab World, mimic the revolutionary attitude that many traumatized Arabs show against their governments especially after the Iraq War and the Arab Spring.

Although the explicit treatment of taboo topics in Arabic terror fiction has been drastically increasing among young authors, the vast majority of taboo-breaking works have been composed by male writers. Women writers have not yet violated the standards of *adab* when addressing these controversial topics. For instance, a work of terror fiction such as *al-Ṭābūr (The Queue)* by Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, which will be discussed in chapter four, criticizes the evil alliance between the religious and political institutions in a unnamed country, but it does not share the explicit and offensive style that many male writers use. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz uses an allegorical language that does not contain specific names of politicians or religious figures and she avoids scenes of sexual obscenity. While the reasons for the lack of female writings that explicitly break the taboos or use an obscene language are beyond the scope of this study, the socio-political status of women in the Arab World must be a direct reason as both Arab men and women live similar traumatic situations.

It is worth mentioning that while these texts are written in Modern Standard Arabic, writers sometimes combine the standard language with colloquial expressions when they describe taboo scenes. The use of colloquial phrases, particularly the sexual words, brings characters into a primitive stage of their life and shows a regression in their behavior. It also demonstrates a sense of loss of faith toward the dominant socio-political and religious values. While breaking the religious taboo reflects a loss of faith and the explicit treatment of sexual obscene topics shows a status of regression, the discussion of politics brings many issues of

trauma together. The new approaches to the topics of terrorism or patriotism, for instance, offer underrepresented views that deepen our understandings of the relationship between the individual cases of trauma and larger socio-political forces that contribute to the sufferings of people in the Arab World.

## CHAPTER 4

### Imagined Maps of Dystopian Realities

How could we come to be in hell and not know it? Had the dread day come? Had we been judged, and then come here? Was Cairo our hell, or was all of Egypt? Was the whole world hell? And I thought that I must be raving, ... But the certainty was stronger than all the questions and all the answers. Yes indeed: despite everything, we were in hell, and all the worldly semblances about us were but an illusion. (Rabī' 258)

The ominous tone, uncertainty, and the inability to comprehend the status quo in the epigraph from Muḥammad Rabī'’s disturbing novel *‘Uṭārid* are recurrent elements of contemporary Arabic terror fiction. The collective tragic fate of urban centers such as Cairo and Baghdad under totalitarian governments becomes the material of satire for Arab writers of speculative fiction. Although usually written in an allegorical way, speculative fiction becomes the best means to criticize the declining situation in the Arab World and introduce the history of this era from below rather than relying on the official propaganda that the state-run media tries to disseminate. With this speculative mode, the publication of dystopian novels has increased steadily, especially after the Arab Spring. Despite the terror and disgust they may induce, these works have been met with a generally positive reception in the Arab World and the West as they depict very complex struggles and talk about recent uprisings that are widely misrepresented or misunderstood.

Depicting the real collective disappointment in the Arab World since the collapse of various revolutionary and progressive movements, dystopian fiction has recently come to the fore in Arabic fiction to present an ironic projection of contemporary totalitarian states. Authors portray societies that are controlled by suppressive police states practicing different forms of oppression, censorship, and marginalization against their people. This dystopian environment engenders corruption, violence, chaos, false propaganda, and lack of feeling of

security, leading ultimately to failing states. The outburst of the dystopian mode in literature came as an expression of the loss of hope for a better national future after the Iraq War and Egyptian revolution. The violent changes that followed these two traumatic events exacerbated the general resentment among the civilians and presaged a gloomy future in the two states. Major cities such as Baghdad and Cairo become the centers for these deteriorating circumstances, and survival in their suburbs requires citizens to adapt to the governmental bureaucracy. In addition to the direct role of the totalitarian state in perpetuating this declining system and leading the nations to a series of social and economic setbacks, the failing suppressive states create deformed societies devoid of morals and lacking a national desire for progress.

Along with allegorical techniques and taboo themes mentioned in chapters two and three that Arab writers rely on to express their traumatic experiences, the dystopian mode has become one of the most remarkable phenomena in Arabic fiction during the last decade. The number of dystopian works that have been written after the Arab Spring, for instance, is more than what was composed during the last century. Writers of Arabic fiction find in dystopia an eloquent expression of their shock after the recent political changes and the rise of what they consider new evil authorities in their countries. Dystopia can be generally defined as a “genre often used to describe a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand, or as a satire of utopian aspiration which attempt to show its fallacies” (Claeys 107). According to Alexandra Aldridge, “The dystopian novelist, instead of recreating some fragment of the actual world, extrapolates from his concept of actuality in order to make a holistic framework, a complete alternative (inevitably futuristic) structure” (18). Recurrent images in dystopian fiction include

technological advances that dehumanize people; institutions that are named after the opposite of their assumed functions; a collective loss of memory that leads to psychological manipulation and produces powerless citizens who are easily controlled by the authorities. From among the variety of themes that dystopian works of fiction address, Arabic writers emphasize the status of victimhood people claim as a result of the psychological impacts of the traumatic events they have been experiencing.

Although their roots can be traced back to the translations and disseminations of Western classic works such as H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and George Orwell's *1984* as well as the reinterpretation of Medieval Arabic utopian narratives including Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, contemporary Arabic dystopian novels emerged mainly as a reaction to the cataclysmic events the last decade. The circumstances that gave rise to this phenomenon in Arabic literature resemble the situation in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, which was characterized by two devastating world wars. Tom Moylan further maintains that dystopian literature developed with the sense of terror that the world experienced in the early twentieth century with the expansion of modern imperialist states:

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of the everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination. (xi)

While the roots of dystopia may include Menippean satire, anti-utopian movements in the nineteenth century, as well as the rise of realism in novels, dystopia became a distinct literary form in the early twentieth century "as capital entered a new phase with the onset of

monopolized production and as the modern imperialist state extended its internal and external reach” (xi). In a similar context of terror, governmental suppression, as well as the hegemony of Western capitalist ideals, Arabic dystopian fiction reflects an irreducible socio-political rift in which the present and future citizen appears as victim of an unavoidable doom and a traumatic fate.

Although writers of Arabic dystopian fiction were obviously influenced by European authors of dystopian novels, Barbara Bakker identifies a few essential elements that distinguish contemporary Arabic dystopia from the Western model. First, modern dystopian fiction often depicts liberal societies controlled by wealthy and powerful elites, whose rules boast “global corporate philosophies and financial institutions that ... lead to a host of disastrous consequences for society and for mankind, consequences such as crime, disease, hunger and global warming” (Bakker). However, Arabic dystopia “resemble[s] the classic Western literary dystopian totalitarian states, constantly overseeing the individual and manipulating historical records and other forms of information in order to secure and retain absolute political power” (Bakker). Second, the political agenda for the ruling elites in Western literature are different from their Arabic counterparts. Bakker explains that “while the classic Western dystopic dictatorships implemented total surveillance in the name of a left-wing or right-wing political ‘greater good,’ the rulers of these Arabic dystopias pursue their own self-interests, controlling the populace for their sole personal benefits” (Bakker). The totalitarian states in Arabic fiction appear either as secular dictatorships, oligarchies, or fundamentalist theocracies that do not have specific religious or political creeds.

In addition to these differences, Bakker adds that such themes as “the nuclear age, environmental issues, mass poverty and terrorism” are central in Western dystopian



literature, but they are not main themes in Arabic fiction, which employ them “only as background settings” (Bakker). The same difference appears in the use of technology in dystopian fiction. In Western dystopias, technology is often employed as a means for dehumanizing and subjugating people, but in Arabic fiction, it only serves as an instrument to provide totalitarian governments “with devices and automated machinery for surveillance and control” (Bakker). The last difference that Bakker discusses is the endings of the Western and Arabic dystopian works. In contrast with modern Western dystopian texts, which tend to create “either happy endings or post-apocalyptic despair” (Bakker), Arabic dystopian works have open endings. Arabic works often end when characters “adapt to their dystopian environments, whether they be post-nuclear, fundamentalist or sometimes subtly dictatorial. ... [T]hese characters appear more victims than heroes, individuals either powerless or lacking the intention needed to change their worlds” (Bakker). While the differences that Bakker lists are applicable to the handful of works she discussed, some Arabic dystopian works, in fact, do not fall under this classification such as Muḥammad Rabī’s *‘Uṭārid* and Aḥmad Nāǰī’s *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (Using Life)*, in which they depict an apocalyptic future. Khālīd Kāki’s “‘Amaliyyat Daniel,” for example, uses technology as a means for enslaving people, and it introduces a ruling elite that promotes right-wing political creed.

This chapter carries out brief analyses of works that best represent the dystopian trend in Iraǰi and Egyptian fiction. It discusses the various ways in which Aḥmad Sa’dāwī’s *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād (Frankenstein in Baghdad)*, Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s *al-Ṭābūr (The Queue)*, Muḥammad Rabī’s *‘Uṭārid (Otared)*, and other works engage with the notion of trauma by imagining gloomy present realities as well as a tragic future for their

cities. I argue that the variety of approaches to dystopia that authors use and the sudden flourishing of this trend in Arabic fiction reflect the psychological repression that these writers live. Young Iraqi and Egyptian authors find in dystopia what Dominic LaCapra calls a process of “working through” and an overexaggerated means to talk about realistic national dilemmas. By using the traumatic stories of their characters, Arab writers of dystopian fiction shed light on the terrible realities they have been experiencing during the last decade and construct new worlds that reach a point beyond healing and repair. In *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād*, Sa‘dāwī uses the grotesque metaphor to depict the ugly face of post-2003 Baghdad. *Al-Ṭābūr* by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz employs the tragedy of the protagonist Yaḥyā to criticize the bureaucracy and the dehumanization of citizens in a post-revolution totalitarian state. Rabī’s *Uṭārid*, on the other hand, introduces an apocalyptic ending to warn of an impending trauma that might destroy the City of Cairo.

### **The Metaphor of the Grotesque: Baghdad Between Reality and Exaggeration**

Fear of the Whatsitsname continued to spread. ... [People] vied to describe how horrible he looked. ... He’s everywhere and has an amazing speed, jumping from roof to roof and wall to wall in the middle of the night. ... No one knew who his next victim would be, and despite all the assurances from the government, people grew more convinced with every passing day that he would never die. They were well aware of the stories of bullets passing through him. They knew he didn’t bleed and didn’t let anyone catch a glimpse of his face. The definitive image of him was whatever lurked in people’s heads, fed by fear and despair. It was an image that had as many forms as there were people to conjure it (Sa‘dāwī 268).

Aḥmad Sa‘dāwī’s *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* (*Frankenstein in Baghdad*) is perhaps the most celebrated post-2003 novel written by an Iraqi author from those who have not emigrated from Baghdad. Incorporating many scenes of black humor, Sa‘dāwī’s dystopian

work received a significant attention from Arabic and Western critics. For instance, in *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner states that Sa‘dāwī has written a “complex allegory for the tribal cruelties in Iraq in the wake of the American invasion.” He adds that:

‘*Frānkshtāyin in Baghdād*’ is about many things other than a creature who terrorizes the city at night. ... Sa‘dāwī blends the unearthly, the horrific and the mundane to terrific effect. ... he is working through a country’s trauma from a series of unusual angles. ... What happened in Iraq was a spiritual disaster, and this brave and ingenious novel takes that idea and uncorks all its possible meanings. (Garner)

In *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sam Metz maintains that unlike typical dystopian works, which usually combine elements of realism and fantasy to describe a nightmarish future that is expected to happen, the dystopian elements in *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* are “not rooted in its speculative, supernatural elements but rather in the very real, nightmarish violence of 2005 Baghdad” (Metz). He adds that the novel “recognizes truths about the present day it describes instead of allowing a means for readers to escape and take solace in the comfortable idea that these books are only projections into an unreal future” (Metz).

Dramatizing the trauma of the post US occupation, *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* relies on elements of dystopia to depict a terrible situation that was probably more severe than anyone expected before the war. Unlike most Arabic dystopian narratives that are set in the future, the events of Sa‘dāwī’s novel take place in the year 2005, two years after the US invasion. The novel contains multiple scenes of car bombs, terrorist attacks, governmental corruption, and various instances of social abuse. *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* begins with a confidential final report written by an Iraqi intelligence committee about the Iraqi Tracking and Pursuit Department, a bureau that relies on astrologers to predict future crimes and

terrorist attacks. The report states that this department was shut down because of the corruption of its representatives, who pass official documents to “someone referred to as ‘the author’” (2). In a flashback, the novel shifts several weeks prior to focus on the Bataween district in Baghdad after an explosion. The detonation takes place very close to the home of Elishva, an elderly Christian lady living in hope for the return of her son Daniel, who went missing during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

The storyteller and junk dealer, Hādi al-‘Attag goes to the morgue to claim the corpse of his friend, who was killed in a car bomb, and sees the body parts strewn everywhere. Hādi stitches the parts together to create complete bodies that the government would recognize as people and their families would give a proper burial. Later, another victim’s soul inhabits the corpse that Hādi has created, and the corpse disappears. The reanimated corpse visits Elishva, and she believes that he is her missing son. When Hādi tells the story of the corpse to people in the café, the journalist Maḥmūd writes about it in the newspaper. Soon, a series of murders take place in the Bataween, and people describe the killer and “how terrible he looked, with a mouth like a gash across his face” (85-86). The new monstrous creature, whom Hādi calls *al-Shisma* or the “Whatsitsname,” begins his mission to avenge the murder of innocent people whose parts make up his body.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the increasing number of murders committed by *al-Shisma*, the Tracking and Pursuit Department starts to investigate the rumors about the monster. After reading Maḥmūd’s article about *al-Shisma*, Brigadier Majīd calls his boss, Mr. Sa‘īdi who claims that the story is not real, and the monster does not exist. At the same time, many people believe

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<sup>18</sup> “Al-Shisma,” a colloquial Iraqi word that is used to refer to something that you do not recall its name and can be translated as the “Whatsitsname” or “Whatchamacallit.”

that the story is true and *al-Shisma* is a sign of the apocalypse. *Al-Shisma* finds out that once he avenges the death of someone, he loses the part of his body that is made of the flesh of same person whom he has avenged. In order to recompensate for the parts he loses, he begins to kill innocent people and thus his mission never ends. The policemen depend on astrologers to predict future bombs before they happen, but they fail to arrest the monster. Meanwhile, one of the detonations deforms Hādi, and while his body is stitched up in the hospital, he is disfigured and his face is deformed, resembling *al-Shisma* whom he had created at the beginning of the novel. Because the police just want to close the case, they arrest Hādi and announce that he is the criminal they are looking for, while *al-Shisma* is still free.

As the case in many postcolonial works, *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* can be understood as a national allegory for the situation in Iraq. *Al-Shisma* is the most important metaphor in the novel as the majority of the events are linked to him. Through the figure of *al-Shisma* and his grotesque image, Sa‘dāwī sheds light on the questions of violence and justice in Iraq during the early years of the US occupation. Merriam Webster dictionary defines the grotesque as “a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature” (grotesque, n.1a). While the circumstances that lead to the emergence of *al-Shisma* are realistic, his creation is fanciful. Talking to the journalist Ben East from *The National Newspaper*, Sa‘dāwī points out that “people with logical minds understand the need for imagination in times of crisis and violence” (East). Thus, the use of a supernatural character that is created miraculously and acts grotesquely is Sa‘dāwī’s way to criticize the dystopian realities that his country experiences. I further argue that the use of a deformed human-made creature is a symbol of

the dystopian realities that the warring sides in the Iraq War caused. The unprecedented violence and the lack of justice intimidate the civilians and produce a terrifying situation as ugly and monstrous as *al-Shisma*.

Since the figure of *al-Shisma* is inspired by European literature, Western criticism on the grotesque is useful to understand this metaphor in *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād*. When the exaggeration of realities reaches a fanciful level, the grotesque emerges as a distortion of known forms. Commenting on the German scientist G. Schneegans' statement that "the grotesque starts when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions" (qtd. in Bakhtin 315), Mikhail Bakhtin argues that "[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (303). Since the nature of the grotesque relies on dramatizing problematic aspects of life and transforming them into unusual monstrous forms, its image is used mainly for satire: "Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque" (306). This satire is used as a mode of expression to shed light on controversial aspects of life, particularly after fundamental or sudden changes in societies that live unstable circumstances:

The present tendency ... is to view the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some forms at least, as an approximate expression of the problematic nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical changes or disorientation. (Thomson 11).

Used often to exaggerate the level of distortion in real life, the grotesque is often associated with the comic or the terrifying (20). When it is associated with comic, it is often used as a form of "the burlesque and the vulgarly funny" (20). When it is used to terrify, it usually

shifts “towards the realm of the uncanny, the mysterious, even the supernatural” (20). While *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* contains many scenes of dark humor, it also includes many terrifying moments that immerse the readers in a dystopian world replete with supernatural forces and obscure destinies.

The grotesque is often used in literature to shock readers with aggressive aspects of the reality. According to Philip Thomson, the “shock-effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of his accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective” (58). Hence, Sa‘dāwī’s use of a deformed creature as a metaphor of Iraq during the area of post US occupation shocks Iraqis, who still live a time of confusion and disorientation as their future seems more dystopian than their tragic present. Thomson identifies several functions and purposes of the grotesque in Western literature, including aggressiveness and alienation; the psychological effect; tension and unresolvability; playfulness; and the unintentional grotesque (58-70). As a “massive fan of the 1994 film *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*” (Hankir), Sa‘dāwī is inspired by the use of the grotesque in Western literature, particularly the metaphor of *Frankenstein* in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. However, Sa‘dāwī’s use of the grotesque does not necessarily correspond with all the purposes and functions that Thomson identifies.

Unlike the scientific experiment gone awry in the original *Frankenstein*, the rise of the monstrous creature, *al-Shisma*, comes a result of a traumatic incident. After an explosion in the Bataween area in Baghdad, Hādi loses his friend Na‘īm, a shock that has transformed him into a more aggressive man: “He swore and cursed and threw stones after the American Hummers ...” (25). What increases Hādi’s anger is the reaction of the

governmental staff who get used to these explosions and show carelessness toward the death of people. They often do not treat the dead respectfully especially when their bodies lack some parts, denying the right for those corpses to be buried properly. As I mentioned above, in order to bury his dead friend, Hādi collects different body parts scattered after an explosion, trying to create a full corpse that the forensics department would treat as a full human being: “I made it complete so it wouldn’t be treated as trash, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial” (27). Hādi’s individual philanthropic reaction, which stems from his respect for the sanctity of dead human beings and his love of his deceased friend, contrasts with the inhumane bureaucratic process practiced by the officials. Between a loyal friend and a careless government that treat the victims as trash, the deformed creature, *al-Shisma*, emerges, an unusual event that parallels the rise of monstrous violent groups in Iraq in the name of resistance.

Although each part of *al-Shisma*’s body has a specific use, the nose is the most important part that gives him its grotesque function. After Hādi stitches the body parts together, the nose is the last missing piece that will give *al-Shisma* the recognition he needs to become a complete body:

The area where the nose should have been was badly disfigured, as if a wild animal had bitten a chunk out of it. Hādi opened the canvas sack and took out the thing. ... It was a fresh nose, still coated in congealed, dark red blood. His hand trembling, he positioned it in the black hole in the corpse’s face. It was a perfect fit, as if the corpse had its own nose back. ... [Hādi]... looked at the face with some dissatisfaction, but his task was now finished. (25)



Although the scene of placing a nose from another corpse onto the body that Hādi has created seems degrading, this process proves to be necessary as it gives life to *al-Shisma*, who rises and begins his mission. For Bakhtin, the image of the nose “occurs throughout world literature in nearly every language, as well as in abusive and degrading gesticulations” (316). Despite the sexual connotations that Bakhtin’s interpretation of the nose offers, he maintains that this image acquires a grotesque character when the authors “adopt the animal form or the inanimate objects” (316). By placing the nose onto the intimate body that Hādi creates, the grotesque image of *al-Shisma* is complete.

Unlike Bahktin’s statement that “the combination of human and animal traits is ... one of the most ancient grotesque forms” (316), Sa‘dāwī introduces a monster who is purely made of human flesh. This departure from a classical image of the grotesque is employed to show that human beings are inherently sinners and the injustice practiced by man against his fellow human beings is completely human made. In *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād*, the creation of *al-Shisma* proves that Iraqis are responsible for the dystopian realities they live. *Al-Shisma* says: “I am made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I’m the first true Iraqi citizen” (Sa‘dāwī 146-147). Regardless of their socio-political, religious, or ethnic backgrounds, all Iraqis are complicit in escalating the conflict they have been living. This image of a human monster who has a passion for murder in the name of justice contradicts the general tendency in Arab culture to describe violent acts as being driven by animalistic instincts.

Although it does not promote a specific religious doctrine, *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* depicts an apocalyptic vision of the country, where Iraq needs a supernatural hero

who purifies the earth from sinners and advocates for the wretched of the state. The injustice in a dystopian city like Baghdad, where powerful criminals oppress innocent civilians, is a sign of a more catastrophic future that will devastate the country. To prevent that destruction, a savior must arise. *Al-Shisma* is believed to be the chosen savior of Iraq who will triumph over injustice: ““With the help of God and of heaven, I will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth, and there will no longer be a need to wait in agony for justice to come, in heaven or after death” (143). Similar to the expected predecessors of the awaited Imam, *al-Mahdī*, in Islamic traditions and the Messiah in Judaism and Christianity, *al-Shisma* is viewed by some characters as the evil figure that causes that liberator of the people to appear:

The old madman thinks I’m an instrument of mass destruction that presages the coming of the savior that all the world’s religions have predicted. I’m the one who will annihilate people who have lost their way and gone astray. By helping me in my mission, he is accelerating the arrival of the long-awaited savior. (147)

Hence, the novel incorporates the apocalyptic views that religions suggest, without specifying a specific faith. Since *al-Shisma* is viewed as just as an “instrument” of justice, this tool can also be used inappropriately to achieve injustice instead. This contradictory understanding of the role of this monstrous figure blurs the distinction between good and evil, a deadly feature of Iraq’s politics during the war that gave rise to violence in the name of justice.

The violent acts of *al-Shisma* begin with legitimate concerns but turns to systematic crimes against the entire society. This situation resembles the violence that erupted in Iraq as a form of resistance against the injustice of the US occupation and the corruption of the new

government, but later develops into murderous acts that target everyone. As an allegory of this transformation, *al-Shisma* “was made up of the body parts of people who had been killed, plus the soul of another victim, and had been given the name of yet another victim. He was a composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths so they could rest in peace. He was created to obtain revenge on their behalf” (130). In the beginning, *al-Shisma*’s mission seems noble as it only targets the villains and helps avenge dead people who were killed unjustly. Similar to the Iraqi resistance that was only made of national figures who struggled for the freedom of their country at the beginning of the occupation, *al-Shisma* “was careful about the pieces of flesh that were used to repair [his] body. [He] made sure [his] assistants didn’t bring any flesh that was illegitimate—in other words, the flesh of criminals” (156). However, later *al-Shisma*’s body contained criminals’ flesh and his resistance deviated from a legitimate mission into a violent process that terrorized the whole nation.

The changes in the body of *al-Shisma* resemble the fluctuations of resistance motives in Iraq, which moved from a legitimate struggle for freedom into organized violence that was mixed with unjustified acts of terror. This unclear situation blurs the boundaries between resistance and terrorism and leads to the death of many innocent civilians. Since *al-Shisma* is composed of body parts of the victims whom he seeks to avenge, whenever he kills a criminal, “that account is closed” (149), and “the person who was seeking revenge has had his wish fulfilled, and the body part that came from him starts to melt” (149). This means that when *al-Shisma* comes to his last mission, he will “have only the body part of the last person to be avenged” (149). At the end of his original assignment, he finds out that his existence depends on his mission, and he will die when he is done. Therefore, he extends his mission by adding to his body the flesh of criminals: “My list of people to seek revenge on grew

longer as my old body parts fell off and my assistants added parts from my new victims, until one night I realized that under these circumstances I would face an open-ended list of targets that would never end” (153). Thus, the original mission of justice in Iraq deviates to endless violence for survival.

Although the rise of *al-Shisma* is associated with the violence he commits, Sa‘dāwī shows that this grotesque creature is still better than the Iraqi citizens whom totalitarian governments created during the last decades. *Al-Shisma* says: “I’m the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I” (146). Despite all the violence he commits, he unites the country in terms of the recognition of the crimes that the warring factions commit. Therefore, he states that because he is made up of flesh of victims from different classes and ethnicities, he “represent[s] the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. He’s the first true Iraqi citizen” (146). Sa‘dāwī uses *al-Shisma*’s statement as a satire to criticize the political realities in Iraq. With all his negative deeds, the grotesque, who is created amidst war and terrorism is superior to the ideal citizen that the Iraqi governments produced. This harsh criticism of the political achievement of Iraq politicians depicts a failing dystopian nation that is more deformed than the grotesque that Sa‘dāwī portrays.

*Al-Shisma* appears in the novel as a monster who is continually built, non-static, and in the process of transformation. According to Bakhtin, “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (24). He adds that “[t]he grotesque body ... is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (303). Similar to life in Baghdad, which shifts from bad to worse

during the occupation, *al-Shisma*'s body undergoes significant transformations. In the beginning of the novel, his body only consists of the flesh of innocent victims. However, after he departs from his noble mission, "[t]he flesh of the innocents, of which he was initially composed, had been replaced by new flesh, that of his own victims and criminals" (200). This transformation occurs because *al-Shisma* "no longer had a clear idea who should be killed or why" (200). This change continues throughout the novel until one day he complains to an old astrologer that his body keeps changing: "'My face changes all the time, ... 'Nothing in me lasts long, other than my desire to keep going. I kill in order to keep going'" (267). Thus, *al-Shisma*'s body keeps transforming over time as his motives for killing change to the degree that he does not know whom and why he kills. Indeed, the body of *al-Shisma* "swallows the world and it is swallowed by the world" to use Bakhtin's words (303).

While the novel describes a dystopian contemporary history of Baghdad under U.S. occupation, it warns readers about a terrifying future. Since the novel does not end with the death or the capture of *al-Shisma*, the problem remains unresolved, a disquieting ending that keeps the Baghdadi population intimidated by ongoing threats. Thomason emphasizes that "the special impact of the grotesque will be lacking if the conflict is resolved" (21). After an explosion at the end of the novel, Hādi's face is disfigured in a severe way that makes him resemble *al-Shisma*. When he comes out of the coma, he looks at the mirror to see that he has become an ugly creature: "As he looked closer, he detected something deeper: this wasn't the face of Hādi the junk dealer; it was the face of someone he had convinced himself was merely a figment of his fertile imagination. It was the face of the Whatsitsname" (267). With Hādi's face transforming into that of a deformed creature like *al-Shisma*, the security

commanders in Baghdad arrest him, believing that he is the criminal they have been looking for. With this arrest of an innocent man and leaving the criminal free, the novel ends with an unresolved crisis and unaccomplished justice.

The creation of *al-Shisma*, his rise, and the transformation of his mission from just vengeance into random violence for survival parallel the post-occupation turmoil in Iraq. Unlike most dystopian works, which warn of a terrible future, *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* is novel of dystopian present and past realities. The narrative takes place during the years 2005 and 2006, when the violence reached an apex in Baghdad, targeting fighters and civilians and transforming the city into a site for civil war battles and sectarian clashes. The transformation of *al-Shisma* from a tool for justice into an instrument of terrorism and destruction warns readers about a more dystopian future of Iraq that is as deformed and unpredictable as *al-Shisma* himself. As a grotesque character, *al-Shisma* is used in the novel not only as a political satire of the situation in Baghdad after the US occupation, but also is employed to terrify Iraqis about a dystopian future and more traumatic events yet to happen under corrupt governments and ineffective civil movements. The uncertainty of the fate of the grotesque and the unresolved crisis leave readers contemplating a dark, surreal, and bewildering future for Iraq.

### **Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s *al-Ṭābūr* (*The Queue*): A Totalitarian Government and Dehumanized Citizens**

‘Everyone was on equal ground. But they all had the same look about them, the same lethargy. Now they were even all starting to think the same way. [...] The queue was like a magnet. It drew people toward it, then held them captive as individuals and in their little groups, and it stripped them of everything, even the sense that their previous lives had been stolen from them’ (‘Abd al-‘Azīz 90-91).

The systematic denial of full humanness for citizens and the complete subservience to the regime that the military role imposed on Egyptians since the 1952 Coup d'état were among the main causes of the Revolution in 2011. Along with the famous slogan associated with Arab Spring, *ash-sha 'b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām* (The people want to bring down the regime), the Egyptians protested the dehumanizing treatment of the state by raising the slogan of “‘ish, ḥurriyya, karāma insāniyya” (“bread, freedom, and human dignity”). After the overthrow of then President Ḥosnī Mubārak, the secret agenda of the deep state came to the fore, and civilians realized that the new elite was a continuation of the former dictatorship. In order to retain its full control of civilians, the regime used corrupt propaganda, intelligence, and excessive bureaucratic procedures that humiliate people and further their sufferings. Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s *al-Ṭābūr* (*The Queue*) skillfully depicts the trauma of living in a totalitarian state after a failed revolution. It introduces a dystopian city that is completely controlled by an unnamed government that dehumanizes its citizens and does not allow any civilian activity without an official permission.

Along with her degrees in medicine and surgery, neuropsychiatry, and sociology, Basmah ‘Abd al-‘Azīz is a human rights activist, journalist, visual artist, and a writer of fiction and non-fiction works. Her close contact with trauma survivors and victims of torture is reflected in her debut novel, *al-Ṭābūr*. Written shortly after the revolution of 2011 and before the military coup of 2013, *al-Ṭābūr* successfully predicts the failure of the revolution and the return of the military rule in Egypt. The novel contains a scathing critique of the police state’s violence, its propaganda, and its surveillance techniques. It also introduces several allegorical characters that represent the passivity of middle-class youth, the hypocrisy

of religious leaders, and the failure of secular movements in Egypt. As one of the earliest Arabic terror fiction novels written immediately after the revolution, *al-Ṭābūr* became an exemplary work in the dystopian trend that began after the Arab Spring revolutions.

Receiving generally positive reviews, especially in the Arab World, *al-Ṭābūr* is influenced by such Western works as “Vladimir Sorokin’s novel of the same name, which pokes fun at endless Soviet lines; Kafka’s *The Trial*, Orwell’s *1984*, Huxley’s *Brave New World* ...” (Machado). All these works share a similar “surreal vision of an impenetrable, dystopian bureaucracy and government overreach, where simple tasks are obfuscated by paperwork and formal processes not meant to be breached” (Machado). However, it is not only the influence of Western dystopian novels that inspires ‘Abd al-‘Azīz to write *al-Ṭābūr*. The personal experiences of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz as a doctor and psychiatrist, who provides treatment to survivors of trauma and torture in Cairo, help her introduce characters that are similar to the victims she deals with on a daily basis. The diverse characters in the novel, including the individuals who do not participate in protests, show that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s work seeks to address the trauma of the civilians regardless of their political engagements.

Similar to *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād*, which is a novel of a dystopian age, *al-Ṭābūr* is a product of dystopian present realities. In one interview, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz describes how she began writing the novel:

One sunny day, I went to Downtown Cairo, where numerous battles between revolutionaries and security forces had taken place since the revolution began in January 2011. While walking down a main street, I came across a long queue of people waiting in front of a closed governmental building. The gate to the building would certainly open shortly, I thought to myself; after all, it was nearly midday. Two



hours later I walked back the way I came, only to find the same people standing exactly where they had been. They hadn't moved. ... I wondered why they stood there so long in vain. Why didn't any of them speak up in protest or frustration about the delay; why didn't anyone suggest they all leave? (Bady)

Thus, what surprises 'Abd al-'Azīz in this incident of governmental bureaucracy is the passivity of the civilians and their inability to protest against the authorities' negligence. Although this incident is real, the novel takes the queue as a metaphor to represent the deteriorating situation after the overthrow of Mubārak's regime. It warns about a more dehumanizing future that the Egyptians will suffer under totalitarian governments that intentionally make the process of obtaining basic needs difficult and humiliating for civilians.

Narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, the novel's events take place in an unnamed city after a failed protest that the authorities call the "Disgraceful Events." From a building called "the Gate," the city is controlled by a powerful force that violently suppressed the uprisings by firing on the protestors. Yaḥyā, a 38-year-old man who is not involved in the protests, receives a bullet in his abdomen from an unknown direction as he passes in the street when the governmental Quell Force fires on protestors. Since the Gate authorities do not allow many activities without an official permission, Yaḥyā has to join a very long queue in order to obtain a Certificate of True Citizenship from the Gate. Only after obtaining this certificate, can the doctor remove the bullet. The queue grows longer every day and the Gate never opens. Meanwhile, doctor Ṭāriq, who of a similar age and resembles Yaḥyā especially in his lack of political activism, is torn between his ethical duty as a doctor and legal responsibilities. Ethically, he should save his patients, but he fears the wrath of the Gate's authorities, which do not allow such medical operations without their permission. Ṭāriq's

internal struggle continues until the end of the novel when he decides to violate the Gate's rules and remove the bullet from Yaḥyā's body. However, the decision comes too late as he finds out that Yaḥyā has already died.

*Al-Ṭābūr* includes several allegorical characters that represent all walks of life in Egypt. In the queue, there are poor, rich, educated, religious, and secular men and women who come to get permissions from the Gate to resume their lives. Inās, a teacher who wants a government-issued Certificate of True Citizenship; Ihāb, a rebellious political journalist; Shalaby, who needs an official recognition for his cousin's martyrdom; Umm Mabruk, an old lady seeking a medical permit; a conservative man wearing galabeya; a short-haired woman who is an activist; and many other figures are included in the novel to show the diversity of people who join the queue and wait in a humiliating way. This diversity shows that the totalitarian authorities dehumanize all citizens regardless of their gender, social standing, political orientation, or religious views. While the hesitations of doctor Ṭāriq and his fear to treat the dying Yaḥyā without an official permission are the main events in this novel, *al-Ṭābūr* includes several subplots that criticize the surveillance, dehumanization, propaganda, and bureaucracy of the totalitarian state. Although rumors spread many times that the Gate will open, nothing happens except that new decrees and restrictive laws are imposed. This surreal, absurd, and dystopian version of a city after a riot depicted in *al-Ṭābūr* offers a very harsh satire for the deep state that controls all aspects of life in Egypt after the revolution.

From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator shows how unnecessary bureaucratic procedures humiliate the citizens and jeopardize their lives. The first chapter opens with a document from Yaḥyā's medical records that resembles the files prepared by the Intelligence (*Mukhābarāt*) before they interrogate accused civilians in many Arab

countries. When the nurse, Şabāḥ, brings Yaḥyā's file, doctor Ṭāriq realizes that he cannot treat Yaḥyā without an approval from the Gate: "She brought him a transparent plastic folder that appeared to be sealed around the edges, with the words *Suspended Pending Approval by the Gate* written on it" ('Abd al-'Azīz 3). Although Yaḥyā's injury is severe and he needs urgent care, the authorities ignore that and impose rules that consolidate their full control and surveillance at the expense of people's lives. The document includes personal information on the patient such as his name, age, and occupation. Recording long lists of details, which doctors often do not completely read, shows that patients are treated as just numbers and the status of their well-being is not a priority for the Gate's authorities.

For Ṭāriq, the most disturbing aspect of the document is that it includes his name as the attending doctor: "Below the number came the name of the attending physician, his own name: Dr. Ṭāriq Fahmy" (3). Ṭāriq, who is known for his good reputation, diligence, and avoidance of politics, encounters the most difficult crisis during his career. Fear of violating the Gate's rules and his concerns for Yaḥyā's life traumatize Ṭāriq and put him in a test between an unjust political obligation and a moral responsibility as a doctor who should save people's lives: "Hundreds of times he had wished it would be struck from the label, but there was nothing to be done. It would remain there, a thorn in his side, until fate willed otherwise" (3). The most absurd fact in this document is that Ṭāriq is intimidated only because he could be accused of treating a suspicious patient, a very disturbing accusation that would bother him until the Gate makes a decision regarding Yaḥyā's file.

Since *al-Ṭābūr* is one of the first dystopian works written after the Egyptian revolution and before this mode of writing developed into a trend in Arabic literature, it retains many elements of classic Western dystopia. For instance, the theme of monitoring

individuals and manipulating their records to secure the state's hegemonic power is an Orwellian-inspired feature. Not only does the Gate oversee Yaḥyā's medical records, but it also fabricates its contents, adding and deleting many details. In document number three, doctor Ṭāriq finds that many sentences are crossed out and many details are missing:

Tarek read the document again and again. Each time he flipped the page over to check the other side, and each time he found it blank. He was searching for the detailed description he had written and signed off himself after seeing the X-ray, but it wasn't there. There were pages missing; he did not know how they had disappeared, but some other hand had clearly been through this version in front of him. All the useful information had been crossed out and replaced with a superficial report; not even a fresh graduate would write something this worthless, and he hadn't any idea who had altered it. (41)

Although Ṭāriq knows about the fabrication of the documents, he cannot do anything. Ṭāriq's inability to help Yaḥyā makes him feel like a worthless citizen in that totalitarian state.

Like many Egyptian doctors who feel humiliated when they are forced to rewrite the medical record of their patients to erase any evidence of the state's violence, Ṭāriq's feelings of humiliation reaches its apex when a "grave-looking doctor" in a military uniform appears in the hospital requesting to meet him in his office (42). When they shut the door to talk privately, the visitor "produced the type of official ID that one didn't dare question, inquired about Yaḥyā's X-ray, and then opened his briefcase and produced an order to confiscate it" (42). While the act of confiscating Yaḥyā's medical records is illegal, Ṭāriq does not object because he finds out that the man's words that "were direct orders, deftly coated with a sheen of courtesy but implying greater authority than any outpatient doctor possessed" (42). Ṭāriq

remains silent and obeys all the man's orders "despite having suffered a nearly unbearable level of humiliation" because he knows that the man is sent by the Gate (43). Commenting on the pressure that doctor Ṭāriq suffers and the attempts to rewrite the history in *al-Ṭābūr*, Jack Shenker states that the novel depicts a realistic dystopian life in Egypt: "I have personally seen the medical files of protesters killed by live ammunition, and looked on as family members were told they must accept a certificate giving 'cardiac arrest' as the cause of death before their relative's body could be released from Cairo's Zeinhom morgue" (Shenker). Although it is based on fantastic elements, the turn to dystopia in post-Arab Spring Egyptian fiction reveals hidden truths about a regime of totalitarian censorship and substitutes for compromised journalism and history.

Unlike many classic Western works of dystopia, which introduce rulers who impose right-wing political agendas, the totalitarian regime in *al-Ṭābūr* oppresses the population for its own personal benefit. These rulers seem to be secular, and they do not aim to promote specific political or religious creeds. Rulers do not communicate with the civilians directly, except when they issue new laws that restrict public freedoms. For instance, on Article 4 (A) about authorization of the removal of bullets, the Gate defines the terms and conditions for conducting work in medical facilities: "*The extraction of bullets and all other types of firearm projectiles, from the bodies of persons killed or injured, whether in clinics, private or public hospitals, and the like, is a criminal act, except when performed under official authorization issued by the Northern Building Gate*" ('Abd al-'Azīz 44). This law on bullets removal and other decrees issued by the Gate seek to crack down on activists regardless of their religious or political views, and they do not aim to promote nationalistic slogans as the socialist dictatorships, for instance, did in the Arab World in previous decades. The Gate tries

to establish a completely submissive citizenry who accept its absolute authority and do not question its legitimacy.

In many Western dystopian works, technology is used by totalitarian governments as an instrument to enforce certain values that shape the consciousness of society, but in *al-Ṭābūr*, the Gate uses technology as a means of surveillance. One of the few examples that reveal the nature of technology and its use as a destructive power is the phone company that offers free phones for people who wait in the queue. The Violet Company achieves great success in having access to the personal information of customers by luring them with free phones. However, the customers discover that they are being observed and their calls recorded:

Their phones had begun to record their conversations and were transmitting them to a receiving device in the Booth. Somehow both phone calls and discussions happening around the phone were all being recorded — even when they weren't actually making a call, and even when their phones were turned off. (120)

Since the Gate is not interested in promoting a specific ideology, it uses technology here to monitor people, violate their privacy, and keep their movements under surveillance. Thus, this use of technology for intelligence purposes introduces a secular model of totalitarian regime that does not have a specific ideology or political agenda other than maintaining its control over the citizens. In this, it differs from socialist revolutionary dictatorships that controlled several Arab countries for long decades such as the Nasser regime in Egypt and the Baathist parties in Iraq and Syria.

In particular, the representation of the main two characters in *al-Ṭābūr*, Yaḥyā and Ṭāriq, illustrates the typical image of a powerless and dehumanized citizen in totalitarian

states. They represent the miserable life that young people live under authoritarian rules. Yaḥyā, who loses his life due to the absurd laws imposed after the “Disgraceful Events,” shows how citizens’ lives are worthless in the eyes of the government. Despite his ordinary life as a middle-class man, who “hadn’t been involved in any political activity during” his life (193), the authorities deprive him of medical treatment. During the one hundred and forty days that Yaḥyā spends waiting in the queue, he never commits any rebellious acts or shows any resentment against the unjust rules that prevent him from receiving medical care. His unlimited patience and inability to protest characterize a powerless citizen who submits to the unjustified hegemony practiced by the government.

Although totalitarian rules oppress all citizens, their most dangerous effect is on middle-class youth, whose stories of suffering become interestingly identical. The intimidating propaganda, the political injustice, and the fear of governmental surveillance produce helpless citizens who blindly follow the rules, and refrain from any political activities, and focus only on their careers. Ṭāriq is a parallel version of Yaḥyā as they both have very similar lives: “Tarek examined the document fervently, realizing that he was remarkably similar to Yaḥyā in many regards. An only child born to a middle-class family, with a father who worked in the public sector and a mother who stayed at home ...” (193). Although he has a good job as a physician in Zephyr hospital, he does not enjoy that privilege as he is deprived of the authority that doctors usually have. Despite his dedication to his work, he is humiliated by the Gate’s agents and his medical records are daily observed and altered. Along with the humiliating moment he experiences at the beginning of the novel when he is ordered to bring Yaḥyā’s medical file, Ṭāriq’s life is an example of the passive citizen who fears the government and lacks the courage to speak against its unjust practices.

The ending of *al-Ṭābūr*, although not apocalyptic as in many dystopian works, captures the tragic outcome of the civilians' passivity. Ṭāriq spends most of the novel hesitating to violate the rules regarding bullet removal and leaves Yaḥyā to die slowly and painfully. He, in fact, "was filled with shame when he saw" Yaḥyā's health deteriorating (208). At the end of the novel, Ṭāriq realizes that if he does not do an operation quickly, Yaḥyā will soon be dead. Since the rules of bullet removal only mention clinics and hospitals, Ṭāriq comes up with the idea of doing the surgery in a house, which he thinks will save him from any legal consequences. However, as a passive citizen who fears the wrath of the authorities, Ṭāriq's "commitment had flickered and waned, and he came up with a plausible excuse to delay his appointment with Nagy to prepare the apartment" for the surgery (216). Despite his constant worry about Yaḥyā's life and his willingness to help him without anything in return, his fear of the Gate overcomes his empathy for Yaḥyā: "Consumed by fear, he worried that he'd been too hasty with his idea and that this single act now could destroy his future forever" (216). When Ṭāriq finally overcomes his fear and decides to "gamble everything to fulfill his promise" of conducting the operation (216), Yaḥyā has already died. This tragic ending serves as a critique of the hesitation of people to stand together against totalitarian laws and shows that any delay makes the dystopian situation beyond recovery.

Although the dystopian example in *al-Ṭābūr* offers an allegorical critique of the secular model of dictatorship in a corrupt state, it also attacks the use of religion to support totalitarianism. The novel shows that the Gate uses religious figures to justify its oppressive policies and to prevent a counter-revolution. For instance, when people in the queue begin their boycott against Violet Telecom, which records their personal calls and monitors them,



the religious leaders interfere to obstruct the civilians' protest. Consequently, the boycott campaign "suffered a harsh blow at the hands of the High Sheikh, who issued a fatwa declaring it impermissible to harm the economic interests of the country and its people. It also criminalized boycotts that negatively affected businesses owned by God-fearing believers" (132). Religious figures such as the man in the *galabeya* find excuses for the authorities to practice strict surveillance, as he claims it helps the state to protect its citizens. He likens the way that the authorities interfere in the personal life of the citizens and monitor them to a father who watches his children: "He said it was the right of a father — and those of a father's rank and position — to watch over his children, using all available means. This could not be considered an infringement of their privacy, ... honest citizens had nothing to hide from their guardians" (135). Thus, the totalitarian regime in *al-Ṭābūr* uses religion as a means to convince the masses of the importance of obeying their rulers.

In the dystopian state that *al-Ṭābūr* describes, things work in the opposite manner of their true functions. Governmental institutions such as media, health, and security are all deliberately utilized by the Gate to weaken, monitor, and brainwash the citizens. For instance, the Zephyr hospital, which should be a place to cure people, becomes a site to share people's personal information and violate their private lives. The security forces are depicted as a source of fear and intimidation rather than peace and safety. *The Truth* newspaper only tells lies and repeats the regime's propaganda:

Amāni read him a statement in *The Truth* newspaper made by an anonymous doctor supervising the treatment of the wounded at Zephyr Hospital. The doctor asserted that the high mortality rate was due to the fact that these rioters were simply too sensitive.

Upon hearing one another's harsh words, they'd succumbed automatically, their hearts having stopped before the ambulances even arrived. (52)

The novel is replete with many other examples that show how the Gate transforms the state into a corrupt country that accepts absurd lies and constructed rumors as a reality. This systematic obliteration of the citizens' memories and sense of reality aims to create a damaged collective consciousness that helps the rulers to extend their hegemony without any resistance from the population.

The novel shows the consequences of the Gate's brutality in suppressing the citizens' thoughts and actions. Along with the humiliating scenes of silencing Tāriq, who sees the official fabrication of Yaḥyā's medical records; the brainwashing of the man in the *galabyea*; the intimidation of the teacher Inās, who needs a certificate of True Citizenship to prove her loyalty after one of her students recited a political poem; and other instances demonstrate the Gate's systematic suppression. Amāni's attempt to help Yaḥyā, who is blacklisted as he was injured during the "Disgraceful Events," by obtaining his X-ray from Zephyr Hospital, exposes her to a traumatic incident. Since waiting in the queue for long weeks proves useless as the Gate never opens, Amāni decides to enter the office where Yaḥyā's file is stacked and get the X-ray without an approval from the Gate: "She didn't have time to weigh her options, and there was no way of knowing what was best. .... If she wanted the X-ray, she would have to get it on her own" (146). In order to do that, she tries to trick the employees in the hospital who do not show any sympathy for Yaḥyā's injury and know that obtaining a permission to remove Yaḥyā's bullet is impossible.

Amāni's failed attempt to steal Yaḥyā's file from the hospital exposes her to physical and psychological torture. Before she opens the office door where the file is located, the

security discovers her illegal presence: “The elevator opened again and angry voices clamored over one another. She couldn’t understand a thing they were saying, but she recognized a face in the confusion, the one face she’d hoped never to see at a moment like this” (146-147). While the scene of Amāni’s arrest is short and ambiguous, it alludes to humiliating treatment by the security forces, who arrest, investigate, and detain her in an unknown part of the hospital. With few details that allude to the physical and psychological torture practiced by the security, the novel moves suddenly to the consequences of trauma that Amāni suffers during the detainment:

Nothingness. She wasn’t blindfolded, but all she could see was black. She moved her palms away from her face ... nothing. She heard no voices, her hands felt no walls, no columns, no bars. She saw and felt nothing, ... She didn’t know how she’d arrived in this emptiness, ... Gradually, she began to forget faces: her mother’s, Yaḥyā’s, her boss’s. The familiar details of their faces became blurry until they were featureless. Was it possible that her own memory was being stolen from her? That she would lose forever the images that had lived in her mind for so long?” (152)

While the narrator does not mention exactly how Amāni reaches that status of nothingness, he implies that the torture practiced by the authorities cannot be spoken about. It is a severe torture that targets nothing less than the annihilation of Amāni. The perpetrators of this torture are beyond questioning, and the victim does not have the right to object.

Although Amāni does not fully comprehend what happens to her, she comes to the conclusion that her only chance of getting out of the Gate’s torture is to submit to the security forces and abandon her rebellious thoughts. During her detainment, Amāni “shouted and shouted, she swore she would never oppose them again, she pleaded for forgiveness, and

then out of desperation she promised she wouldn't see Yaḥyā again" (153). The pain of torture is so severe that she "felt her body trembling and the muscles of her face contract. Things would never go back to how they were" (153). This short scene on the trauma of Amāni shows the struggles that the opposition suffers under totalitarian regimes. The symptoms continue to manifest themselves even after Amāni returns home, causing her to act strangely with Yaḥyā and other friends. Amāni changes from an enthusiastic woman, who risks her life to advocate what she views as justice to a passive person who isolates herself in her apartment, trying to avoid communicating with people.

Under the Gate's totalitarian rule, many characters try to reenact the trauma they experience by oppressing other civilians who might be less powerful. By mistreating fellow citizens, the perpetrators try to compensate for the lack of power and the psychological injury that the regime causes. The novel shows several examples of civilians oppressing fellow citizens. This oppression manifests itself in daily incidents of marginalization, objectification, dehumanization, and intimidation. This insidious trauma is not based on single incident of mistreatment, but rather occurs frequently, affecting the victims gradually and over the long-term. Maḥfūz's reaction toward Inās after their debate about his deceased cousin is an example of how women are viewed in patriarchal societies. Because of their disagreement whether Maḥfūz's cousin was a martyr or not, Maḥfūz views Inās as a worthless woman: "He had to admit that she'd really riled him from the moment he had arrived in the queue, *even if she was only a woman*. She was just one person out of dozens, hundreds even, one against a whole village, but *she was still just a woman* — and one who didn't know her place" (162; emphasis added). Repeating the statement that "she was only a woman" refers to a misogynistic perception of women as an inferior gender. This example of

a male trauma victim disdaining a woman because of her gender is just one of multiple instances of insidious trauma that happen in the novel and are based on gender, class, and religious beliefs of the characters. The common thread among all these incidents is that the perpetrators benefit from the lack of democracy in their totalitarian states, which offers them an ideal opportunity to offend other fellow citizens and relieve the trauma that the state causes without legal consequences.

Despite its simple structure and straight forward plots, *al-Ṭābūr* represents a turning point in dystopian Arabic novels. Not only does it incorporate the main elements of classic Western dystopia, but it adds more Arabic elements that start to appear frequently in later dystopian fictions such as the lack of national or religious agenda that drives the ruling elites to oppress the civilians. The fact that the novel is often read allegorically as a brilliant prediction of the failure of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 inspired other writers to begin writing a series of novels and short stories that prophesy a dystopian future for the Arab World. As a female writer and psychiatrist, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz succeeds in delving into the everyday struggles that men and woman suffer under totalitarian rules. The passivity of the citizens who refuse to revolt, their fear of the authorities, and their desire to mistreat the ones who they feel less powerful can all be read as a trauma inspired reactions. The description of the bureaucratic state that dehumanizes its citizen, monitors them through technological devices, and brainwashes them with false propaganda is Orwellian per excellence.

### **Apocalyptic Future in Arabic Dystopia**

“Anyone who gives way to the temptation to deliver an opinion on the probable future of our civilization will do well to remind himself of the difficulties ... as well as of the

uncertainty that attaches quite generally to any prophecy.” (Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 6).

Fear of the future and visions of the apocalypse are as old as Arabic literature. Many Qur’ānic verses and Ḥadīths talk about the signs of the Day of Judgement, depicting an apocalyptic future. This rich eschatological tradition predicts the destiny of humanity and the final events of history in detail. For instance, the opening verses of Sūrat at-Takwīr portray some aspects of the horrors of The Day of Resurrection: “When the sun is wrapped up [in darkness],/ And when the stars fall, dispersing,/ And when the mountains are removed,/ ... A soul will [then] know what it has brought [with it]” (Ṣaḥeeḥ International, 81: 1-14). The fears of an apocalyptic demise came to the fore again in the last decade through dystopian fiction. However, writers of Arabic dystopia usually detach themselves from religious themes and focus their plots on socio-political and economic disasters that the future will bring to their countries. With the collapse of dreams of ideal societies that many Arabs aspired to, more pessimistic attitudes toward the future evolved, leading to a dystopian mode in Arabic literature.

Since the political and literary scenes in the Arab World interact with other global experiences, Susan Buck-Morss’ and E. Ann Kaplan’s work on the construction of the future in utopian and dystopian fiction is instructive. Buck-Morss and Kaplan discuss broader political circumstances that gave rise to the genre of futurist political dystopia and give global examples that can help better understand the sudden surge of Arabic Dystopia. Buck-Morss explains that while the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War marked a new era with more positive hopes, “the construction of mass utopia was the dream of the twentieth century. It was the driving ideological force of industrial modernization in both its capitalist and socialist forms ... this collective dream dares to imagine a social world

in alliance with personal happiness” (IX). Kaplan maintains that “the *pretrauma* political dystopia emerges from the destruction of this dream,” setting the stage for a cynical genre that addresses the frustrating realities of the future (4; emphasis added). Similarly, the trauma of the Arabs, whose dreams of better social and political realities have been destroyed, is reflected in the fear of the future that the new generation of Arabic writers express in their dystopian fiction. Not only they focus on the sufferings from past psychological wounds, but they also depict characters who experience future intrusive images to a similar extent to those who remember traumatic past events.

The studies of pre-traumatic (as opposed to post-traumatic) stress disorder focus on the psychological responses to future traumatic events that patients might potentially experience or witness. According to Dorte Berntsen and David C. Rubin, the term pre-traumatic stress refers to “disturbing future-oriented cognitions and imaginations as measured in terms of a direct temporal reversal of the conceptualizations of past-directed cognitions in the PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] diagnosis” (264). Symptoms of pre-traumatic stress disorder may include: “1-Repeated, disturbing and unwanted images of a possible future stressful experience, 2- Repeated, disturbing dreams of a possible future stressful experience. 3- Suddenly acting or feeling as if a possible future stressful experience already were happening (as if you were pre-living it)” (268). According to Kaplan: “the circulation of futurist disaster narratives induces a kind of pretraumatic stress, both in the individuals” as well as communities (3). Kaplan adds that:

Conceptualizing the phenomenon of PreTSS offers a new lens for an expanded trauma theory. Future time is a major theme, along with thinking through the meanings and cultural work ... that dystopian pretrauma imaginaries perform in our

newly terrorized historical era. ... [T]he circularity of representations that both anticipate and respond to historical events is significant. Such representations have a strong affective charge, especially as historical events lead to war or anticipate future ecological devastation. These fantasies function as warnings, a kind of 'memory for the future,' ... . (Kaplan 4)

Since many Arabic works of dystopia include intrusive images and dreams of future events, the symptoms of pre-traumatic stress disorder recur frequently. These works also function as a witness to the socio-political collapse that the future is expected to bring.

Similar to many works such *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (Using Life)* and *al-‘Irāq+100 (Iraq+100)*, which set their events in the future, *‘Uṭārid (Otaled)* is preoccupied with the concerns of the Cairene citizens, whose revolutionary dreams have not come true. *‘Uṭārid* frames and articulates the increased level of deterioration and contamination of Egyptian society. It also captures the transformation of Cairo from a pre-catastrophic age into a violent post-apocalyptic dystopia by the year 2025. The city of Cairo that Muḥammad Rabī‘ depicts in *‘Uṭārid* is far different from the utopian idyllic post revolution world that Egyptians aspired to in 2011. In this novel, dystopia offers an oppositional narrative strategy that exposes the exploitive nature of the authorities in the post revolution. As a corrupt city (*madīna fāsida*), Cairo becomes a hellish place that offers death, violence, and trauma to its exhausted civilians. Hence, the novel creates a space to critique an imperfect utopian dream that people thought they were able to achieve after the revolution. It also warns of difficult times that Egyptians will experience due to the collapse of their collective dreams.

The eponymous protagonist’s life is all but destroyed because of the pretrauma symptoms he suffers including depression and paranoia, all of which are related to his fear



that future events will destroy the lives of all individuals in Cairo. In the introductory chapter, before the armed forces of the Republic of the Knights of Malta invade Egypt in an alternative history, the protagonist predicts a bloody future for his country. This violence begins with social crimes and later become an incomprehensible political crisis that damages the Egyptian national identity:

I saw that I would kill many people and that a great number of people would be killed in whose deaths I'd play no part. I saw that people would kill their children and eat their flesh and I saw that the man sitting eating and watching TV had broken the last of the seals and set loose everything that would later come to pass. All this I saw and understood nothing. (Rabī' 5)

This narrator's prophesy in the first chapter proves to be true and on a larger scale. The novel moves in the following chapter to the year 2025, where Cairo is occupied by a foreign army that leads the city toward a complete socio-political destruction. Hence, the future does not offer hope or relief for the civilians but confronts them with disastrous realities that will devastate their lives and further exacerbate their traumatic circumstances.

When the novel narrates the events of the year 2025, a further separation occurs between the dreams of better future before 2011 and the dystopian imaginaries of life in a future Cairo. Characters wish to die because they live in a hellish situation, and only death can free them from that nightmare:

[W]e depart this world in expectation of another, less full of torment—of a hell less full of torment than this world. At least in hell we would know that we were being tormented, would be certain that we were paying the price for our sins here, and that

this price would be paid out in the end, and that better lay ahead—all contrary to what we'd seen today and knew for a fact: that worse was to come. (101)

While the novel was written in 2015, it warns of an impending catastrophe that will happen in the 2020s. Death becomes a desired destiny as it is more merciful than the misery people will experience. The constant traumatic crises that civilians live make their highest hope to die and find a better life in the afterworld: “They live in hope of a better existence in some place other than this. All men dream of eternal life in heaven” (101).

Farīda's death at the end of *Uṭārid* can be read as a sign of an apocalyptic future for Egypt. Although she is not the protagonist, her relationship with the main character, the rogue police officer 'Uṭārid, gives hope for an optimistic future, but her death undermines that dream. Through Farīda, the novel exposes the human side of the murderer 'Uṭārid, who shoots people without mercy. However, Farīda, who plausibly represents Egypt, is executed at the end in a very brutal way; the executioner slices away her nipples, cuts off her hands, knees, and legs and throws them to a crowd of naked people: “The executioner cut in a circle around the base of each breast, digging deeper and deeper until he'd removed them both. Then he threw them to the crowd” (338). This graphic scene of execution followed by a description of hundreds of people fighting to get Farīda's body organs that the executor cuts and throws can be read as a national allegory for the fate of Egypt, which will be divided piece by piece and thrown to bloodthirsty forces. This, indeed, is a horrific prophesy for a catastrophic future for a country that moves from one crisis to another.

Another novel that paints an apocalyptic future for Cairo is Aḥmad Nājī's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh (Using Life)*. Although it depicts the life in Cairo after two fictional natural disasters: “Tsunami of the Desert” and “the Great Quake,” Nājī's novel deals with a future

political catastrophe. The civilians in Cairo wake up one day in the future to find their city completely covered by a sandstorm, and after a few weeks the city is hit by a series of earthquakes. This *nakba* leaves people in a constant fear and trauma:

I watched people change. I watched them undergo shock, only to regain consciousness amidst a world drowning in tears and nightmares. As the economy collapsed and famine began to spread, I watched the mounting of international humanitarian aid campaigns of historic proportions. ... To a large portion of the human race, it seemed that the Day of Resurrection had arrived. (168)

While the events of the novel show that the Cairenes overcome these natural catastrophes, the focus shifts to the socio-political deterioration in the city. The accumulation of these successive disasters opens the gate for foreign agencies to come under the umbrella of humanitarian aid, thereby gaining an opportunity to intervene in the very structure of the city.

The mysterious project of rebuilding Cairo in a new architectural style, which is sponsored by a foreign agency and supervised by an American woman named Parpika, is an example of this alien intervention. This foreign project suggests getting rid of the Nile to empty the city and redevelop it: “Cairo would wither and empty out as a result, with a massive population shift to the suburbs. As every crisis is an opportunity, the heart of the city would be much more easily redeveloped, and possibly turned into an open-air museum of sorts” (91-92). While it seems benevolent, the project of rebuilding the city and getting rid of the river evoke the fear of a foreign conspiracy that targets the very existence of Cairo. This architectural plot brings the city closer to an apocalyptic ending. Hence, the natural disasters that destroy the city and socio-economic crises that disrupt people lives are followed by a

mysterious future political conspiracy that threaten to fully damage the remains of the capital city.

Similar to Egyptian fiction, Iraqi literature depicts the future as a source of concern. Edited by Ḥasan Balāsīm, *al- 'Irāq+100 (Iraq + 100)* is the first Iraqi science fiction anthology, and it includes ten short stories, three of them originally written in English. For Balāsīm, writing science fiction about the future “can be wonderful and exciting- an opportunity to understand ourselves, our hopes and our fears by breaking the shackles of time. It’s as if you’re dreaming about the destiny of man!” (Balāsīm 8). The idea of this collection of stories is to imagine Iraq in the year 2103, one century after the U.S. invasion and occupation of the country. One of the dystopian stories in this anthology is “‘Amaliyyat Daniel” (“Operation Daniel”) by Khālīd Kāki. It captures the fear of an apocalyptic future that threatens Iraqi identity, especially after the foreign interventions and the totalitarian rule in the country. The events of Kāki’s “‘Amaliyyat Daniel” take place in the District of Kirkuk during the year 2103. Kāki uses a classical Orwellian model of Dystopia in which the city is under the rule of a brutal Chinese leader named Gao Dong.

Similar to Big Brother in Orwell’s *1984*, Gao Dong abuses his absolute power by restricting the liberties of the civilians in Kirkuk and imposing massive surveillance, claiming that he protects them “all from the threat of the past” (136). Therefore, he prevents people from using any ancient languages, except Chinese: “The people were forbidden from speaking Syriac, Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen, or any language other than Chinese. The punishment for speaking those languages, or reading about history, literature, or art in them was merciless: you were archived” (136). Archiving people through advanced technology is the fate of citizens who violate Gao Dong’s rules. This process involves:

[B]eing incinerated in a special device- resembling one of those UV tanning beds that were all the rage in the late twentieth century-your ashes would then be removed to a facility that produced synthetic diamonds, where, just a few hours later, all that had been left of you would re-emerge as a tiny, glittering stone. (136)

The totalitarian rule of this foreign dictator targets people's memory because the past for the citizens is what connects them to their national identity.

“‘Amaliyyat Daniel’” has a pessimistic ending that recurs in many Arabic futurist works of fiction. Similar to *‘Uṭārid* which ends with the execution of Farīda and the deterioration of life in Cairo, Kāki’s story has an apocalyptic ending. The protagonist Rashīd ibn Sulaymān is archived at the end of the story despite being innocent. He goes with his friends to ruined graveyards nearby, where they sing beautiful love songs in “the old tongues and recite poems that Gao Dong’s government had specifically reclassified” (140). While Rashīd’s friends know how to switch to a Chinese song when a member of the red police comes near, one of the young men in the gathering carries on singing in his native language, saying strange words “My hands are bound, / A chain is wrapped around my neck. ...” (141). Despite not being a rebel, Rashīd is archived at the end of the story: “[W]hen General Woo Shang presented Gao Dong, The Beloved, ... with a new pair of diamond-studded boots, in his castle on the Euphrates River, one of the tiny gemstones on those boots would still be vibrating, deep inside, with the words of a silly song” (143). The gemstone on the boot was the soul of Rashīd after being archived, and it contains many love poems and stories from old languages.

While it is a science fiction story that deals with imaginative events, the ending of “‘Amaliyyat Daniel’” warns of an apocalyptic future for Iraq. The prophesy of the end of the

national independent state and the disappearance of its culture are recurrent themes in Arabic dystopia. The brutal ending of Rashīd's life and the transformation of his soul into a gemstone in the shoe of a foreign dictator is shocking. In addition to the clear implications that the Iraqi citizen has no value in the eye of the authorities, the humiliating destiny of the protagonist is associated with the loss of national memory. After the people of Kirkuk are forced to forget their history, culture, and languages, they become unable to confront the occupying forces and their hegemonic technological power. The loss of collective memory of the past leads them to a catastrophic future. The scene in which a group of young men sing and tell stories, using their ancestral languages gives hope for a resurrection of the local culture and resistance to the alien forces. However, this hope is destroyed at the end of the story when Rashīd is archived. The absence of solutions in the story introduces an apocalyptic future for Iraq, where people are doomed to failure. While “‘Amaliyyat Daniel” was written more than a decade after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which relied on highly advanced technology to topple the regime and establish an alleged democracy, Kāki's story on the creation of a future Chinese dictatorship in Kirkuk mimics that terrifying American experience in Iraq.

In reading Aḥmad Sa'dāwī's *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād*, Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz's *al-Ṭābūr*, and selections from other works as representatives of the dystopian mode in Arabic fiction of the last decade, this chapter offers a detailed analysis of three recurring motifs in that literature: deformed visions of present realities, dehumanized citizens, and the apocalyptic future. While Kaplan's statement on how dystopia comes as a reaction to the destruction of utopian dreams, Arabic dystopian fiction emerges as a critique of the circumstances that cause the collapse of hopes for better future in the Arab World.

Examining the metaphor of the grotesque in *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād*, the allegory of the queue in *al-Ṭābūr*, as well as the ominous future in a few works demonstrate that Arabic dystopian fiction shares many elements of classic Western dystopia but departs significantly in the treatment of such themes as the political agenda of totalitarian governments, the means and motives for oppression, as well as the endings of these works. The fact that three stories out of the ten in Ḥasan Balāsīm's *al- 'Irāq+100* were originally written in English by Iraqi writers who live in the West show that this literary mode succeeds in crossing linguistic and geographical boundaries, becoming one of the favorite means for Arab writers to express their traumatic fear and despair.

## CONCLUSION

The scope of the study of trauma in the Arab World has proliferated since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This proliferation reaches its apex with the outburst of a series of uprisings across much of the Arab World during the last decade. The brutality of the regimes in suppressing the protests, the collapse of national dreams of smooth democratic transitions, the collective sufferings of the civilians, the rise of murderous identities, and the fear from a worse future are main factors that have contributed to the emergence of a new literary mode: terror fiction. Violence, totalitarianism, fundamentalism, apocalypse, and loss of faith are all recurrent themes in this emergent mode of writing. These topics are all linked to the traumatic events that Arab writers had witnessed. With this ongoing political turmoil, a young generation of Arabic authors established a new mode of fiction that addresses the broader consequences of trauma on the collective consciousness of their people. Addressing socio-political and economic concerns, this literature depicts the violent realities resulting from the recent political transformations.

Reading this mode of writing from trauma theory perspective, this dissertation has discussed three elements of Arabic terror fiction. First, it has demonstrated that all the selected novels and short stories represent national crises that qualify them to be read as works of cultural trauma. By using national allegorical techniques, the authors depict instances of collective trauma that affect entire societies. Second, the dissertation has examined the phenomenon of breaking religious, sexual, and political taboos as a response to traumatic experiences. Third, it has also explored the rise of dystopia as a trend in Arabic literature, focusing on the grotesque metaphor, the dehumanization of the civilians, and the



fear of apocalyptic future. Examining these elements and placing them within the context of trauma studies has shown that Arabic writers of terror fiction use this unusual dystopian mode to create an engagement with traumatic events that severely affected the Arab World, giving a new voice for underrepresented views about the recent socio-political changes in the region.

The works discussed in this dissertation shared comparable views and techniques on the topic of cultural trauma. Using allegorical characters, the authors usually dramatize the impact of trauma and show its consequences on the national level. In ‘Alī Badr’s *Ḥāris al-Tabgh*, the crisis of murderous identities creates a social rift between Iraqi citizens who belong to different religions and sects. Similarly, the sectarian clashes and the US occupation in Dunā Ghālī’s *Manāzil al-Waḥshah* traumatize the family and separate them at the end of the novel, turning Baghdad into a city of loneliness. The graphic portrayal of the situation in Cairo under an imaginary foreign occupation in Muḥammad Rabī’s *Uṭārid* presents a hellish city that has reached a point beyond recovery. The stories of the individuals in these works are allegorical and usually tied to larger struggle that involve social, political, and economic crises. Seeking to represent collective experiences of suffering, authors of cultural trauma shed light on the cumulative effects of national struggles by historicizing and politicizing these traumatic events.

Although not unique in Arabic literature, the phenomenon of breaking taboos has recently come to the fore in terror fiction to introduce an increasing situation of losing faith in social, religious, and political values among survivors of traumatic events. Since the cries of the victims are not answered by their basic senses of trust, the survivors respond to their ordeals in ways that violate the standard of conventions. *Ma’riḍ al-Juthath* by Ḥasan Balāsīm

includes stories that can be interpreted as a criticism against religious symbols. Aḥmad Nājī's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh* intense use of sexual expressions and metaphors makes it one of the most controversial contemporary novels in Egypt. Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid* also appears as a breaking-taboo novel that uses obscene language and images in order to offer a harsh critique of the socio-political situation in post Arab Spring Egypt. With highly critical fiction that breaks the salient taboos of sex, politics, and religion, the writings of those authors are interpreted based on Judith Herman's argument on the loss of faith as well as Freud's concept of regression.

The future always represents a source of stress and fear in Arabic terror fiction. The increasing number of dystopian novels and short stories reflect a pessimistic attitude toward the future in the Arab World. Terror fiction writers employ dystopia to depict societies that suffer the collapse of their dreams for better future. Although Arabic dystopian fiction is heavily influenced by European works of dystopia, the works examined in this dissertation are different in terms of the political function, themes, as well as the endings. Creating an alternative history, dystopian fiction depicts harsh realities that promote fears of the future as well as feelings of despair. The grotesque image in Aḥmad Sa'dāwī's *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* shows a deformed present crisis in Iraq and an unsettled future dilemma. Basmah 'Abd al-'Azīz's *al-Ṭābūr* uses the Gate allegory in order to warn of a possible failure of the revolution and a return to military rule in Egypt. Khālid Kāki's "Amaliyyat Daniel," Aḥmad Nājī's *Istikhdām al-Ḥayāh*, and Muḥammad Rabī's *Uṭārid* all have apocalyptic endings that warn readers of a horrific future that will annihilate the future of urban centers such as Kirkuk, Cairo, and Baghdad.

While this dissertation focuses on the representations of trauma in Arabic terror fiction in Iraq and Egypt, this mode of writing has also flourished in other Arab countries that had witnessed similar violent events. If the 2003 War in Iraq and the revolution of 2011 in Egypt gave rise to a young generation of frustrated writers to establish this new mode of writing, Arab writers from other countries also contribute to this emergent literature. For instance, the fact that the winners of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in the last five years came from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia and four of them can be classified as terror fiction writers demonstrates the great shift in contemporary Arabic fiction and shows the significance of trauma as a central theme in their works. Such novels as *Ḥarb al-Kalb al-Thānīyah* (*The Second War of the Dog*) by the Palestinian novelist Ibrāhīm Naṣr Allāh and *al-Talyānī* (*The Italian*) by the Tunisian writer Shukrī al-Mabkhūt show the influence of the terror mode across the Arab World. The popularity of novels written by young female authors such as *Barīd al-Layl* (*The Night Mail*) (2019) by the Lebanese writer Hoda Barakāt as well as *al-Khā'ifūn* (*The Frightened Ones*) (2017) by the Syrian novelist Dīmah Wannūs broadens our understanding of this mode of writing, complements the scope of my dissertation, and urges for new future directions in this field.

While the main thrust of this dissertation has been to bring trauma modes of inquiry into conversation with a contemporary Arab context, it has extended the debate into an understudied literature. Relying on multidirectional approaches to trauma that includes Freudian-Caruthian as well as Postcolonial debates, my dissertation has created a critical engagement for understanding some instances of past, present, and future sufferings in Iraq and Egypt. By analyzing a handful of terror fiction works from a trauma theory perspective, my dissertation has situated Arab experiences within larger historical contexts. Well aware of

the concerns that the plurality of approaches may reproduce or perpetuate the same limitations and inconsistencies inherited from trauma theory, I have aimed to make a call for a reconsideration of the Arab trauma through what Judith Butler calls “the recognition of shared precariousness” (28). This ethical recognition, Butler argues, offers “strong normative commitments of equality and invites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs” (28-29). Indeed, by discussing recent examples of trauma in Iraq and Egypt together and situating them within a context of universal human sufferings, this dissertation, I believe, has demonstrated the ability of trauma theory to fulfill its moral commitments and avoid the “political and ethical paralysis” that Caruth warns of (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 10).

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