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Post Invasion Iraq: Gothic Chronotope and the Trauma of the Homo Sacre in Baghdad's Mortuary

A B S T R A C T

Since the eighteenth century, gothic aspects seep into the fictional representation of traumatic experience, be it individual or collective. Representing trauma through gothic aspects places the reader in a direct confrontation with the uncanny; it faces him with traumatic feelings that powerfully haunt and unsettle the present. The study argues that Burhan Al-Shawi's *Baghdad's Mortuary* is a gothic novel that figures out violence and rupture in the aftermath of 2003. Al-Shawi, in other words, situates the suspense and grotesque of gothic mode to represent the apocalyptic sociopolitical discourse of physical and psychological ruination which contour Iraq in the aftermath of the American invasion. Symbolically, the location of the novel, namely the mortuary, is a gothic chronotope where the repressed returns to haunt Adam's consciousness by means of ghostly corpses who speak for and about their traumatic death. The study aims at answering the following question: how does the author represent the conflation of life and death in post invasion Iraq? The study significantly reflects on the collective traumatic identity that the whole Iraqi people share regardless the details that differentiate one experience from another.

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العراق ما بعد الغزو: كرونوتوب القوطي وصدمة الإنسان المقدس في مشرحة بغداد

أوفى حسين الدوري / جامعة تكريت / كلية التربية للعلوم الانستنية

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الخلاصة:

جسد الأدب القوطي منذ القرن الثامن عشر جوانب عدة في تجربة الصدمة النفسية سواء اكانت هذه التجربة معنية بفرد او مجتمع بأكمله. وعلى هذا الأساس فإن الرواية القوطية تضع القارئ في مواجهة مباشرة مع غير المألوف حيث يتلمس بكافة حواسه الحيشيات المروعة لتجارب الماضي والتي تطارد الحاضر بكل قوتها لتزعزع بنيانه وتأسر كيانه. تزعم الدراسة أن رواية برهان الشاوي "مشرحة بغداد" هي

رواية قوطية تستكشف العنف والتمزق النفسي والمجتمعي الذي استحل العراق أعقاب العام ٢٠٠٣. يوظف برهان الشاوي التشويق والغربة ضمن إطار الرواية القوطية ليجسد مفردات تجربة الصدمة وما آلت اليه من دمار جسدي ونفسي. من الناحية الرمزية، فإن مسرح الاحداث (المشرحة) ما هو إلا زمكان قوطي يعود من خلاله المكبوح ليطارد وعي آدم حارس المشرحة الميت الحي. كما يتجسد المكبوح رمزيا في الرواية في هيئة جنث شبحية تسرد قصص موتها الدامي. تهدف الدراسة إلى الإجابة عن السؤال الآتي: كيف يصور المؤلف التداخل الزمكاني بين الحياة والموت في أعقاب احتلال العراق؟ من خلال الإجابة عن هذا التساؤل فإن الدراسة تعكس و بشكل واضح الهوية الجمعية المؤلمة التي يتقاسمها الشعب العراقي بأكمله بغض النظر عن التفاصيل التي تميز تجربة معينة عن تجربة أخرى .

الكلمات المفتاحية: القوطية، الصدمة، الوعي الجمعي، هومو ساسر، هيتروتوبيا

Introduction

Humanity is usually traumatized by different forces including wars and their aftermath. Iraqi-American war is a unique source of trauma in Iraq's history. Roger Luckhurst (2012) explains:

Iraq war existed in an odd stage of incompleteness, at once a war, a civil war, and a postwar occupation, an intervention begun as an ostensibly symmetrical engagement between armies that mutated into asymmetrical guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and the classic violent aftermath of colonial withdrawal. The politics of the war remains intensely divisive and, for the American public, the sympathies deeply confused. (721)

The narratives of the war trauma hero dominate American cultural and literary discourses. The contemporary Iraqi novel, on the other hand, witnessed an outstanding preoccupation with themes of violence, collapse of authority, political chaos, lack of security, and sectarian war. These themes aim at reflecting on the essence of physical abuse and victimizing the Other.

What is distinguished about the Iraqi novel in the aftermath of 2003 is that it tackles the mythical figure of the “Homo Sacer” and situates its major features according to the context of the Iraqi traumatic discourse. Homo Sacer, encompasses the meaning of sacred or accursed in Roman Law, is an individual banned from common society by law, deprived all his rights, and may be killed by anyone without announcing the killer as a murderer. Following Foucault's explanation of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben, an Italian Philosopher, utilizes this figure to reflect on the problem of sovereignty as a power inflicted upon life. Agamben (1998) explains:

What defines the status of homo sacer is therefore the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed to... This violence – the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit... this violence opens a sphere of human action... This sphere is that of the sovereign decision, which suspends law in the state of exception and thus implicates bare life within it. (52-3)

In light of the preceding discussion, the concept of “Bare life\ Zoe” finds its echo in Giorgio Agamben’s definition of homo sacer. It signifies the biological existence inherent to all humans; a continuous, nevertheless unnoticeable domain of ultimate bios (political authority). The concept of Homo sacer is characterized by its exclusion from the dual modalities of existence: Zoe and bios. His exclusion from the Zoe stems from the perceived unworthiness of his existence, while his exclusion from the bios arises from a legal deprivation of the fundamental right to life. The Iraqi individual, in this context, embodies the concept of homo sacer, being subjected to assassination or death in explosions, thereby stripped of his existence both as a human and as a distinct individual.

Associating homeland and sovereign power with a specific biopolitics, Hassan Blasim’s collection of *The Corpse Exhibition*, Sinan Antoon’s *The*

Baghdad Eucharist, Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, and Burhan Shawi's *Baghdad's Mortuary* are examples of homo sacer in Iraqi postcolonial gothic trauma novels which verbalize the traumatic aspects of the Iraqi experience by means of form and content; they interestingly reflect on the conflation of life and death and/or life subservient to death in post invasion Iraq. They reflect on the way modern political theory institutes a foundational equation between formal and informal sovereign power alongside the concept of violence. In other simple words, they manifest the trauma of life and death's the equation of. With such theme the line between the metaphysical realm (death) and the physical one (life) is almost blurred.

Ikram Masmoudi's *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015) underscores that Iraqi novels of post invasion are: "united by the fact that they all are doomed to a living death in the context of the lawlessness of war and the state of emergency and exception that it creates." (19) In response, Michel Foucault confirms that physical violence inflicted upon the physical body is a practice of political power.

In his *Discipline and Punishment* (1977), Foucault argues that: "the body...is directly involved in a political field: power relations have an immediate hold on it: they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, ..." (25) In this sense, the violated physical body is a subordinated being devoid of subjectivity. While the physical violent inflicted upon the body is a traumatic event, the symbolic resurrection of this body indicates the Freudian uncanny, namely the return of the repressed, the return of what is silenced and subjugated. Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition*, for example, skillfully blurs the lines between fact and fiction, provoking both empathy and repulsion, to criticize those who were responsible for Iraq's devastation. He does not address a particular political agenda, but rather represent death as a focalized entity which functions like an agent with intentionality, exercising violence through various forceful

instruments. Experiencing, witnessing, and thus depicting the contemporary postcolonial form of power grounded on the performance of sovereignty, Blasim uses the tools of ironic tone and simple but highly symbolic language to weave the context of violent death. Blasim says:

I just started to write dialogue how people talk – it's not like I am doing something new, or surprising," he says modestly. "I just hear how people talk about politics, how they talk about death. People in the street in Iraq make jokes when a bomb goes off. They joke about death because it's normal – they have lived for a long time with war. If you don't make these kind of dirty jokes, if you don't embrace that black humour, you can't survive. (<https://www.theskinny.co.uk/books/features/hassan-blasim-once-upon-a-time-in-iraq>)

Following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, exiled Iraqi writers yearn for a utopian homeland free of persecution and authoritarianism. However, their return to Baghdad shatters their utopian ideal and transforms it into a terrible horror. Masmoudi explains: "The homeland was not only burning with the fire of the invasion and the occupation but also engulfed in sectarian violence and blind killing" (16). Accordingly, the bleak background of traumatized Baghdad has a thematic and technical impact on postcolonial Iraqi literature, where certain issues are documented in an experimental way. Masmoudi claims that contemporary Iraqi stories demonize the brutality, murder, kidnapping, moral corruption, and bankruptcy that plagued Baghdad during and after the occupation. (16) Most novelists who belonged to and witnessed the overwhelming sectarian war wrote novels that meet, in their notions and troops, the gothic fictional architecture.

Postcolonial gothic trauma fiction is marked by darkness, aggressive thoughts, fragmentation, gaps and a death-driven mood, all contribute to the mysterious traumatic atmosphere that invaded Baghdad. In his essay,

"Apocalypses Now: Collective Trauma, Globalization and the New Gothic Sublime," (2016) Avril Horner significantly adds:

Gaps and aporias characterize Gothic texts and trauma narratives, which are both marked by repetition and return, fragmentation and split subjectivities. Trauma and Gothic narratives equate to disruption, irruption and melancholy. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that they frequently seep into each other (36).

Iraqi writers employ experimental narrative strategies to convey the country's bloody history. They utilize metafiction, symbolism, flashbacks, psychological realism, and other techniques to convey traumatic substance of narratives they reflect on. As such, they produce a multi-generic fiction that is best to be identified as a postcolonial gothic trauma. Quoting Michelle Balaev (2008), it can be defined as

a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels... [it focuses upon] the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming up to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world" (149).

The emphasis on remembering the past and documenting history is intended to address four major questions: What actually happened? Who is the victimized? Who is the victimizer? And what, if anything, can be done? Answering these questions is a process of working through a long term of trauma that requires a collective mourning—a matter that results in acknowledging the loss, verbalizing the wounds, purifying the traumatized soul, and thus restoring the constitutive elements of writing back Iraq's collective trauma. All these perspectives are at the core of Burhan Shawi's *Baghdad's Mortuary*.

Baghdad's Mortuary: A Reflection on a Violated Body and Gothic Trauma

Burhan Shawi is an Iraqi novelist who is famously known for his fictional series that highlights Iraq's postcolonial traumatic labyrinth. They are *Adam's Labyrinth*, *Eve's Labyrinth*, *Cain's Labyrinth*, *The Labyrinth of Ghosts*, *The Labyrinth of the Devil*, *the Labyrinth of Forgotten Souls*, *The Labyrinth of the Blind*, *The Labyrinth of the Prophets*, and *The Labyrinth of Great Nothingness*.

Burhan Shawi's *Baghdad's Mortuary* is a gothic nightmare of dread and agony, chronicling Iraq's traumatic reality as well as the devastation that befell Baghdad in the aftermath of 2003. Precisely, the novel addresses Iraq's endless pain. If one, metaphorically, considers Iraq the largest dramatic stage where nothing is performed but tragedy, where all the actors take the roles of corpses, and where the décor is designed on the backdrop of death on devastation, the reader sympathetically and empathetically asks about the time when this play will reach its end. Theoretically speaking, such topic may take one to Edgar Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" (1846) in which Poe tackles the aspect of effect produced out of any literary work in the reader's mind and heart. Among other things, Poe focuses on the writer's choice of melancholic effect his literary work produces. This choice springs from the idea that melancholy is

legitimate of all the poetical tones, [that is] equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone, [alongside enclosed setting because it is] absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident. (17-21).

The narrator opens the narrative with Adam's unusual mental state. He is possessed by a hidden premonition : "that pushes him to end his usual nighty tour and goes to his room on the ground floor to watch the CDs that he bought during the day from Bab al-Sharqi in the center of Baghdad." (9) Rather than

purchasing new foreign films or pornographies, he was convinced by the salesman to get a documentary that depicted an actual slaughter operation. Adam experiences a complex mix of fear and curiosity as he watches the act of one man being slaughtered at the hand of another. His curiosity evolves into a state of astonishment, which instills in him a sense of coldness and an involuntary trembling. Observing various models of corpses, such as headless bodies, charred remains, and those with severed limbs, gouged eyes, shattered skulls, and mutilated ears or tongues, he has never encountered such a brutal and barbaric depiction of violence against a living individual.

Corpses function as motifs indicating referential and relational ties to history. They are signifiers of the ghostly history that haunts the present and possesses it. Moreover, they are the bridge between the physical realm and Platonic metaphysical one where truth resides. This is confirmed by Katherine Verdery who explains that “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time making past immediately present” (27)

At midnight corpses narrate oral but collective history about miseries, betrayal, injustice, oppression, and the violent forces and conditions in Iraq. In discussing their lives and deaths, these talkative corpses practically address oligarchy of the religious hypocrisy and the corruption Iraq has endured throughout its history. The morgue, accordingly, opens up philosophical questions about death and its nature, life and its meaning, and the lines that separate both realms. What all corpses have in common is that they were all victimized . However, death, ironically gives them a degree of freedom and clarity that life deprived them.

The conflict is set in a mortuary where one smells bloody death in every corner. Accordingly, the mortuary, quoting Foucault, is a heterotopian space which is located beyond man's daily life. It is a place:

... in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.

The mortuary, as a place, exists everywhere and "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" in every culture. However, what is distinguished about this heterotopian place, the mortuary, is its absolute difference from all other places. It is, quoting Foucault, "the placeless place" where reality, visibility, and life are all mixed with their counter aspects, namely fantasy, invisibility, and death. The uncanny mortuary in Shawi's novel functions as an objective correlative to post 2003 gothic Baghdad:

The night of Baghdad is terrifying. Deserted streets and dark corners are buzzing with silence. There is no electricity, no lights, and no life pulsing except in some areas where politicians and party leaders live... Darkness colors life and death in Baghdad (39)

Depicting Baghdad as a gothic chronotope locates the conflict in a gothic psychogeography where horrific and bloody scenes as well as living corpses fuel the novel with aspects of gothic sublime. Depending on Edmund Burk's *Philosophical Enquiry*, terror is the principal feature of gothic sublime as it is produced out of the most powerful passions, namely pain and danger:

Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasure which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest

imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body, could enjoy. (Burke, Of the Sublime)

So as to implant Iraq's sectarian conflict in its collective memory, Shawi relies heavily upon certain poetics that are closely related to common people. Borrowing Sir Philip Sidney's expression, Shawi is a "true poet" as he enriches the context of narration with synesthetic and kinesthetic images—a matter that enables the reader to comprehend,

The time has now passed midnight, the Baghdad mortuary has closed its doors, and there is only the guard doctor and his assistant and the sentinel guard, the area in which the morgue and the streets leading to it, and alleys That surrounds it, and even Baghdad is plunged into darkness.
(5)

This finds its echo in the way the mortuary is described:

When the official working hours end, the morgue becomes desolate and turns into a location outside of time, place, and history. The entire universe disappears and life in Baghdad turns into a mortuary, in where there a unified picture of life and death. (39)

Every night, the characters, all called Adam and Eve, wake up to tell their death stories . The narrative concludes with all of the bodies escaping from the morgue and walking throughout Baghdad, which seems to be a lifeless city full of corpses. In a more profound symbolic context, even the mortuary guard finds later that he is a moving corpse:

The signs of dawn were beginning to appear in the sky, With the breakout of the white thread, the Guard Adam saw the people crossing the bridge, and the dead life began to creep in the streets of Baghdad. The streets were crowded with fleeing corpses. He knew them, many of them, certain that they were dead, certain of everything around him

yet he wasn't sure of one particular thing, Is he alive or dead? \ He took the boy's hand and said to him: \ -I need to know Adam whether I'm alive or dead, but how can I know this?\ The boy looked at him with a stare full of kindness, melancholy, and pity and said to Adam the guard as if he addressing a child: - I don't know how would you figure that, and I can't answer you whether you are alive or dead?\ - Who can answer me then? - Nobody. - There must be someone who will come and tell me the truth. - Nobody comes. (157-58)

Verbalizing and thus voicing the death story of every *living* corpse allows the individualism of every story to transcend the limitations of privacy, resulting, by contrast, in a common awareness of the collective traumatized identity and of "a society emerging from a major war, suffering from diminished economic resources, [and] experiencing rampant internal conflict" (Smelser, 2016, 31). Above all, it creates a sense of solidarity which Frantz Fanon insists on, as a case in point, when he discusses issues of constant horror inflicted upon native Algerians by the French colonial war. He recommends the collective struggle against the colonizer and considers it the best path towards recovering from the trauma of oppression. In this sense, the collective traumatic consciousness can be alleviated through collective efforts such as recognition, representation remembrance and massive cooperation. (Jeffrey Alexander, 2016, 204).

Shawi's novel relies heavily upon the components of reality and obscurity which are intricately intertwined in a magical realistic approach making all artificial and fictitious events perfectly innovative. This approach enables Shawi to present a dialogical narrative structure that facilitates the conflict's mobility from the material world of life to the immaterial world of death and vice versa. This is recognized and can be exemplified by the situations according to which Adam endlessly questions the identity of the mortuary's night visitors,

attempting to uncover the enigma of the continuous sounds and echoes of footsteps coming down stairs into the corridor where his room is located:

Who were these people at the gate? How did they suddenly disappear?
And who was this person looking at me through the main entrance to the mortuary? Where did they come from? And why at this time? Were they one of those down visitors, who usually come after midnight? Were they the ones making the commotion upstairs after midnight? (46)

Adam questions the essence of mystery he lives in every night so as to comprehend its grotesque nature and thus possibly avoid its threatening consequences:

What is the secret of life? Is it an awareness of existence and its opposite, namely death? Who assures us that the dead are not aware of existence? But how do they know it when they are under the soil? (130)

Invoking the reader's excitement, Shawi, as a writer of this novel, intentionally locates the events and their leading characters within gothic space where he erases the boundaries between concrete and abstract so as to represent the dialogical bridge that life and death share in Iraq. Disguised in the character of Adam, Shawi symbolically wanders "is this the other world or the mortuary? is the mortuary transformed into a Doom Day? Where are we? on earth or in the other world?" (137) This dialogical convergence of life and death leads one to explain two main points. First: it is represented by means of different fictional elements such as storytelling and chronotope. Second: it is used so as to produce a constant experimental effect in the reader's mind and heart, the effect that finds its echo in the collective memory of Iraqi people. Representation of collective memory is achieved through focalizing the traumatic experiences of common people—a matter that highlights Shawi's

romantic, 20th and 21st literary notions that confirm the necessity of focusing upon common issues in terms of characters, setting and language.

Highlighting the dialogical nature of storytelling, Shawi mixes dialogue with first person narration and omniscient one. In other words, the conflict is elaborated on either by Adam, or the narrator, or by the exchanged dialogue among corpses, and among Adam and other common characters like the doctors, their assistants, and other living characters. While first person narration locates the novel under the umbrella of psychological realism, omniscient narration highlights the external reality Adam is surrounded by. In addition, the exchanged dialogue among the corpses may give the reader an impression of being in front of dramatic performance witnessed or watched by Adam. Moreover, the dialogue takes more than one form. In addition to the form of external exchanged dialogue, there is also the internal dialogue that is exchanged between Adam and his inner self. This internal dialogue is marked by simplicity on the one hand, and confusion on the other hand. However, this apparent incongruent mixture is, in fact, an exact embodiment of contemporary Iraqi life.

In terms of setting, the dialogical tendency is manifested in the mortuary, as an actual setting and symbolic one, real places referred to by the doctor and other living characters, and the psychological setting where corpses have lost their lives. The psychological setting is tackled via the individual memory of each corpse. The story of Eve Hanover, one of the talkative women corpses, is an example:

My name is Eve. The family that hosted me here in Baghdad called me Eve Hanover because I came to Iraq from the city of Hanover in Germany, where I have lived for about fifteen years. I returned less than a month ago to review the Property Dispute Authority in Baghdad to recover our properties that were confiscated in the early eighties, and

also to obtain my Iraqi documents such as citizenship and passport. It is true that I do not have acquaintances in Baghdad, but the sister of one of my acquaintances in Hanover hosted me and even helped and guide me to the institutions and departments I should review. I left my husband and children in Germany and came alone. (82)

The story of Eve Hanover reflects on interconnected key aspects that are memory, Zoe, bios and homo sacer. All the talkative corpses are homo sacers whose lives are controlled and regulated by biopolitics. All the corpses practiced bare life, that is a mere biological existence deprived of any kind of recognition, legal rights, and\or protection. However, it is death only that grants them the power of narration and thus transforms their "homo sacer" identities into that of "Prometheus", the revolutionary Greek mythical figure. Unlike life's biopolitics, death biopolitics grants the corpses verbal voice by which they share their collective traumatic experiences. Death biopolitics, in addition, empowers them to level of being capable of transcending the limits of the mortuary:

...true, there are corpses escaping from the mortuary. He tells himself that there are dozens of corpses in the mortuary hall. Have all of them escaped? Where did they go? How could they move and escape while they are dead? Who got these images that were displayed on television? Who filmed them? he noticed that the official state channel was the one that displayed these images. (130)

Questioning the essence of life and death and the difference between the two in the bloody Iraq remain unanswered—a matter that resembles the main thematic concern of the whole novel that is: Life in gothic Baghdad is nothing but a bare life where all Iraqis are homo sacers buried in the soil of a deadly life.

Conclusion

Shawi's *Baghdad Mortuary* is an experimental novel that is marked by innovative techniques and unique thematic concern. The gothic elements of novel situate Iraq's collective memory within the context of gothic trauma, aiming at healing the collective wounds of Iraq as being the homo sacer who is subjugated by biopolitics and sovereign power and thus reduced to a bare life. Therefore, symbolism, objective correlative, and intertextuality contribute to the process of dramatizing the overwhelming reality Iraq's lives with and witnessed in the aftermath of 2003.

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