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Echoes of Iraqis' Plight: Reading a Selection of Hassan Blasim's Short Stories as Trauma Narratives

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Abstract in English

Literature has played a fundamental role with respect to the conceptualization of the sufferings of trauma survivors, signifying a close kinship between literary tropes and clinical symptoms. Nevertheless, what many writers have emphasized is not the inevitable continuity of the trauma throughout history, but the transformations that gave birth to a post-trauma diagnosis and turned it into a narrative and cultural force. Some Iraqi writers have sufficiently registered the traumas and their psychological and social aftermath which Iraqis experienced throughout different phases of their history. Contemporary Iraqi narrativists have shown the nature of trauma and the variety of its forms and consequences in their fiction. Hassan Blasim is not an exception. He has dedicated his entire short fiction to elucidate what the Iraqi people went through from 1980 to post-2003. The present study draws upon the theory of "trauma narratives" which is pioneered by American university professor and trauma theorist Laurie Vickroy. In doing so, it ultimately attempts to read five of Blasim's short stories as trauma narratives which focus on the psychologically destructive impacts of wars which people in combat zones suffer from.

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1. Introduction

The modern face of Iraq has been scarred by many wars and conflicts. From 1980 to 1988, Iraq was involved in a fruitless war with Iran, which crippled the country's economy and left a catastrophe in almost every Iraqi home. This war was followed by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which sparked the Gulf War and led to the UN economic sanctions that added more insult to Iraqis' injury.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the straw that broke the camel's back. Toppling Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, it paved the way for fierce civil war

and opened the door for the emergence of Al-Qaeda Organization and ISIS, extremist groups that Iraqi people paid a backbreaking cost from its resources and sons to get rid of. The claws of this chaotic period snatched horrific numbers of Iraqi souls and displaced others putting the country in the midst of a sectarian hurricane.

The Iraqi people endured during these wars and conflicts immense amount of torture, anguish and suffering. Civilians were under the heavy hand of war, the ordeal of displacement, the collapse of infrastructure and fundamental services, and the deaths of their loved ones. A number of Iraqi writers have poured tremendous creative energy into capturing the turmoil and trauma that have defined modern Iraq. Writers like Sinan Antoon, with novels such as *The Corpse Washer* (2013) and *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2007), and Ahmed Saadawi, known for *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) and *The Chalk Door* (2021), have taken different approaches to depict the horrors of war, the fragmentation of identity, and the haunting weight of memory. Inaam Kachachi, through works like *The American Granddaughter* (2008) and *The Outcast* (2018), offers deeply personal portraits of exile, guilt, and the complexities of navigating life between two worlds. Each of these authors brings something unique to the table, yet they are united by a shared desire to document the human cost of Iraq's years of catastrophic upheaval (Al-Janabi, 2015). Among these voices, Hassan Blasim deserves particular attention. His work does not just add to this collective narrative. Rather, it makes it strange in a way that forces the reader to look again. While he shares with his contemporaries a deep concern for Iraq's wounds, his unapologetically fragmented, visceral, and surreal stories set him apart as one of the most compelling and unsettling chroniclers of modern Iraqi trauma (Ghanem, 2021).

Blasim is an Iraqi expatriate filmmaker, poet and short story writer. He was born in Baghdad in 1973. He began his artistic career by filmmaking. However, his films were not well received by Saddam's regime because of the political messages they had. After some arrests, he left Iraq in 1991 and roamed different countries till he settled down in Finland in 1999, the place from which his experience with short stories launched (Sellman, 2022).

Blasim started to publish his short stories in Arabic online. Afterwards, the stories were translated into English and published in three collections of short stories: *The Madman of Freedom Square* (2009), *The Iraqi Christ* (2013), and *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* (2013). Due to the brilliance of his stories, Blasim received recognition and attention worldwide (Qutait, 2022). He was described as "one of the most important Arabic-language storytellers" (Qualey, 2018, n.p.) and was characterized as "the best writer of Arabic fiction alive" (Yassin-Kassab, 2010, n.p.). He also received many awards, most notably The UK Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014 and The Finland Award in 2015. Accordingly, his stories were translated into more than twenty languages (Loytty, 2023).

The subject-matters of Blasim's stories appear to attract the attention of readers all around the world. His stories consistently tackle tangible and down-to-earth themes because they are set in some tumultuous epochs of Iraq's past. However, they are not particularly stories of war but stories about how war cracks the souls of people embroiled in it and involves them in tremendous difficulties (Loytty, 2023). "Many of Blasim's characters," says Al-Masri, "suffer from mental illness caused by the myriad traumas they experienced in Iraq" (2018, p.119).

By choosing to write about the post-traumatic shock of Iraqis, Blasim aligns himself with the tradition of trauma literature which indicates the postmodern trip of the conception of trauma from scientific and medical domain to the realm of literary studies. The foundation of postmodern trauma studies can conveniently be dated to 1980, when posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first encompassed in the diagnostic code of the psychiatric and medical occupations. The formal acknowledgment of PTSD was the consequence of unrelenting political campaigns which American veterans returning from the Vietnam War organized. They managed to spread public awareness of PTSD throughout America. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) admitted that a psychiatric disorder could be entirely ecologically-specified and that a traumatic event happening in maturity could have long-term psychological effects (Whitehead, 2004).

In the 1995s, trauma theory appeared on the stage after a number of theorists, namely Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, released studies which focused on the study of personal trauma, such as mental illness and abuse, and collective experiences of trauma, such as genocide and slavery (Cuddon, 2013). These key theorists clarified that "literature–and literary narrative in particular– might possess a privileged (if not unique) value for communicating our deepest psychic pains" (Pederson, 2018, p.95).

While some critics have categorized Blasim's works in terms of the refugee crisis, human rights, dystopian tone, absurdism, surrealism, magical realism, dark fantasy, and Gothicism, few have systematically examined how his stories map the psychological symptoms of trauma. Therefore, this study aims to explore the representation of trauma in five of Blasim's short stories, namely "The Green Zone Rabbit" (2013), "Crosswords" (2013), "A Thousand and One Knife" (2013), "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" (2013), and "The Reality and the Record" (2009). It analyzes how Blasim portrays trauma through character experiences, narrative structure, and literary devices. It applies Laurie Vickroy's trauma narrative theory to identify common patterns and techniques that define Blasim's stories as trauma narratives. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Iraqi literature as a form of cultural and psychological documentation in the post-war era.

Understanding how trauma is portrayed in literature is crucial, not just for academic purposes, but also for recognizing the long-lasting impact of war on individuals and societies. By framing Blasim's work within trauma theory, the study also helps to spotlight Iraqi voices that narrate war's aftermath from a deeply personal perspective.

2. Literature Review

Since the global circulation of Blasim's short fiction, a growing number of researchers, writers, and critics have turned their attention to the many complexities and layers embedded in his stories. There has been a notable interest, or a fascination, with the figure of the refugee, a recurring theme that Blasim confronts head-on in much of his short fiction (Al-Masri, 2018; Fox, 2023; Sakr, 2018; Blythe, 2022; Majstorovic, 2023; Ghanem, 2021). These studies often grapple with the emotional, political, and existential weight that Blasim attaches to displacement, identity and belonging.

Interestingly, the Finnish critic Mikael Loytty has weighed in on Blasim's work on more than one occasion (2020; 2023), offering high praise for his artistic brilliance. Yet, despite acknowledging Blasim's Finnish citizenship, Loytty stops short of claiming him as a Finnish writer. That ambivalence says a lot, perhaps, about how literary identities are assigned.

Other critics have taken different routes into Blasim's world. Golden (2021), for example, explores the theme of human rights and the brutal honesty with which Blasim exposes their fragility in the face of war and exile. Then there are those who attempt to label the aesthetic terrain of his short fiction. Fifer (2017), struck by its raw and often harrowing content, calls it dystopian. Naimou (2025) refers to its absurdism and Scranton (2018) talks about its surrealist nature. Malreddy and Kemmerer (2024) classify it in terms of magical realism; they even call it "irrealism" to capture its deeper break from conventional narrative logic (p.92). Flood (2014) leans toward classifying it as dark fantasy, while Masmoudi (2019), captivated by the horror-like atmosphere that pervades many of Blasim's stories, opts for a gothic reading.

This study hypothesizes that there has not been a properly comprehensive and focused study which has read Blasim's short stories as traumatic narratives in which the characters suffer from trauma and its aftermath. Therefore, it tries to fill up this gap.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

By depending on some psychological and scholarly studies and theories (such as trauma theories, postcolonial theory, and object relations), and discussing the fiction of a number of notable novelists (such as Edwidge Danticat, Pat Barker, Larry Heinemann, Marguerite Duras, Dorothy Allison, and Toni Morrison), Vickroy specifies in her *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002) a new genre in fiction which is wholly devoted to exploring trauma and its ramifications. Vickroy labels it "trauma narratives" and defines it as those narratives which "represent trauma, defined as a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" (2002, p.ix). This "lasting psychological disruption" is generally known as PTSD which Vickroy refers to its symptoms (p.12) depending on what the APA has theorized.

Simply put, PTSD is a mental health condition which initiates after a person goes through a traumatic life event (Brown and et al, 2019). In the fourth volume of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV)* (1994), the APA puts forth a definition and diagnostic criteria for PTSD. It defines it as the outcome of a traumatic experience, or a trauma, such as war, terrorist attack, assault of different kinds, disaster, serious injury, incurable disease, life-threatening, death of a family member or a friend, etc. Firstly, a person experiences one or a group of these events himself, or witnesses personally the traumatic experience(s) as they happen to others, or learns that the experience(s) happened violently or accidently to a close friend or relative, or extremely exposes to aversive and detestable details of the experience(s) such as witnessing a dead body or body parts. Secondly, he responds to these traumatic experiences with intensified helplessness, fear, or horror.

As for the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, or symptoms, they are as follows:

1- Persistently distressing re-experiencing: undesirable intrusive memories of traumatic experience(s) such as flashbacks, uncontrolled thoughts, hallucinations, illusions, and nightmares.

2- Emotional numbing and avoidance: amnesia for significant parts of traumatic experiences, anhedonia, disconnection from social ties, pessimism, and attempts to avoid feelings, discussion, places, activities, people, or thoughts which are triggers of previous traumatic experiences.

3- Hyperarousal: highlighted emotional and physiological interaction such as anger, severe anxiety, irritability, hypervigilance, exaggeration in responses, problems in concentration, sleep difficulties including dangerous watchfulness (APA, 1994).

It is generally agreed that PTSD-inflicted people suffer from dysfunctionality in different domains of their lives. APA points out, in its *DSM-IV*, that "The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (1994, p.429).

For Vickroy (2002), the traumatized who suffer from PTSD are habitually those who are voiceless and marginalized. Art can manipulate its instruments of imagination and symbolic experimentation to help readers more effusively realize, and even participate in, the traumatic experience they read about. Since "the nature of traumatic experience" is "overwhelming, alien, amnesiac, and often incomprehensible," it necessitates "new historiographic, testimonial and representational approaches to help interpret and configure the enigmatic traces of evidence and memory" (p.1). Since trauma narratives take into consideration "the problematic nature of reconstructions" (p.xi), they are often experimental in literary technique. As such, they "incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works" (p.xiv). These techniques spark in the reader a response of "empathetic unsettlement" (p.xi) because "trauma narrativists enlist their readers to become witnesses of these kinds of stories through the unconventional narrative translations of traumatic experience and memory that give them a different kind of access to the past than conventional frameworks" (p.20).

Vickroy (2002) theorizes that traumatic experience can be communicated to readers by manipulating three patterns of narration strategies: first person testimony, third person narrator, and an authorial voice which combines both (pp. 5-11). Moreover, she specifies a group of characteristics of trauma narratives which distinguishes them from other trauma texts of popular media.

First, trauma narratives reflect "awareness of the effects of catastrophe and oppression on the individual psyche" (p.1). In this way, they "bring us into the visceral experience of traumatizing events and their aftermath" by their "truth value fictionalizations" (p.11).

Second, they "raise important questions and responsibilities associated with the writing and reading of trauma as they position their readers in ethical dilemmas analogous to those of trauma survivors. Writing and reading about trauma present painful dilemmas for writers and readers alike" (pp.1-2).

Third, they "are often concerned with human-made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the way social, economic, and political structures can create and

perpetuate trauma. They offer us alternatives to often depersonfied or institutionalized historiographies" (p.4).

Fourth, they aim "to reshape cultural memory through personal contexts" (p.5). Similarly, they "attempt to draw readers into the more complex and painful social and personal implications of trauma" (p.7).

Fifth, they suggest "bits of history and of lived experiences of the past that are not totally recoverable but are suggested by affective or sense-memory details" (p.21). As a result, they "can be truthful and reveal the emotional experience of historical phenomena" (p.21).

Sixth, they "reveal the tensions and conflicts implicit in retelling and re-experiencing traumatic events" (p.29). Thus, they incorporate "different forms of levels of awareness" by creating "a number of narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory," such as "gaps," "repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and focus on visual images and affective states" (p.29).

Seventh, they reflect "the speechless terror" of trauma. As such, they depend on "somato-sensory" symbols such as "somatic sensation, behavioral reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks" (p.31).

Eighth, they "appeal to a community of readers" by immersing them "in individual experiences of terror, arbitrary rule, and psychic breakdown" so that they "might begin to appreciate these situations" (p.34). Consequently, they are "fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experience" (p.1).

The present study manipulates a descriptive-analytical approach. It depends on Vickroy's theory of trauma narratives as a tool for its argument. Thus, it eventually attempts to read five of Blasim's short stories as trauma narratives in the light of Vickroy's theory.

4. Results and Discussion

In his fiction, Blasim wants to give his readers an intimate look into the consequences of war on Iraq (Hanley, 2022). In an interview, entitled 'Literary defiance,' a journalist asks him, "Why is it important that stories from Iraq reach readers now?" To which he replies, "Iraq has been a maelstrom of violence and destruction for more than five decades. Literature is one form of human cognitive defiance. It's like life, which violence cannot stop, however vicious it might be. We can't just sit around watching and waiting. We have to get on with it" (Ashfeldt, 2015, p.10).

In his attempt to write about the traumas which the Iraqi people experienced, Blasim makes his short stories teem with people who exhibit one symptom or more of PTSD and whose coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by their traumatic experiences (Abdulemam, 2024). In doing so, he finds himself obliged to lean back on breaking the classic conventions of narratology followed in short fiction. "Essentially," say Burnell et al, "traumatic experiences challenge the plot line of the life story, which creates an incoherent, disorganised, and fragmented narrative" (2009, p.93). In stories which narrate personal and collective traumas, readers, in Vickroy's words, "are challenged to enter into a multifaceted examination of the past that is a dynamic, uncertain, and

always-unfinished process, one that recontextualizes traditional historical, psychological, and narrative boundaries" (2002, p.35).

In his short story titled "The Green Zone Rabbit" (2013), Blasim presents a traumatized Iraqi depending on a testimonial strategy. In testimony, the narrator uses a first-person perspective to speak about his own traumatic experience (Mir, 2023). This stylistic choice is very beneficial because it enables the writer "to produce a highly convincing account of trauma which implicitly positions the reader as an empathetic listener or witness" (Whitehead, 2004, p.9). Vickroy (2002) calls this strategy "direct testimony" (p.5).

The narrator of "The Green Zone Rabbit," Hajjar, is a bibliophile and a driver of an assassination squad that executes sectarian revenge operations in Baghdad. His traumatic experiences start when American jetfighters bomb Baghdad in the nineties and increase during his service as a soldier in the Iraqi Army before 2003, which does not last long. Hajjar reflects, "I ran away from military service. I couldn't endure the system of humiliation there" (Blasim, 2013a, p.38). At this point in particular, Hajjar experiences emotional numbness towards the world around him. He also shows a form of dysfunctionality as far as his reading insatiability is concerned. He remarks, "I lost the urge to read. For me the world became like an incomprehensible mythical animal" (Blasim, 2013a, p.38).

Hajjar responds to his desertion experience with fear. However, he is relieved after the downfall of Saddam's regime, a time when the Civil War begins. In this time, unfortunately, he receives a traumatic blow when two of his brothers are beheaded by militants for sectarian reasons. He vividly narrates their calamity:

> They massacred two of my remaining brothers. They were coming back from work in a local factory that made women's shoes. The taxi driver handed them over at a fake checkpoint. The Allahu Akbar militias took them away to an undisclosed location. They drilled lots of holes in their bodies with an electric drill and then cut off their heads. We found their bodies in a garbage dump on the edge of the city (Blasim, 2013a, p.38).

Then, Hajjar enters into a severe state of avoidance when he deserts his family because they remind him of his heavy loss. He clarifies,

> I was completely devastated and I left home. I couldn't bear to see the horror on the faces of my mother and brothers. I felt lost and no longer knew what I still wanted from this life. I took a room in a dirty hotel until my uncle came to visit me and suggested I work with his sect. To exact revenge (Blasim, 2013a, p.38).

Hajjar's joining the assassination squad is actually a maladaptive coping mechanism which the traumatized adopt to temporarily relieve the symptoms of PTSD (Evert, 2022).

The loss of his brothers makes Hajjar experience intrusive flashbacks and distressing memories mixed with problems in concentration. He points out,

> As soon as it fell dark, I would grab a bite to eat and go and surrender myself to the sofa, reminisce a little about the events of my life, then take out a book and read distractedly. The world in my head was like a spiderweb that made a faint hum, the hum of a life about to expire, of breaths held. Delicate, horrible wings flapping for the last time (Blasim, 2013a, pp.38-9).

Overwhelmed by gloominess and pessimism, Hajjar suffers from anhedonia and begins to feel that his life is doomed. He reflects, "I was sunk in the bitterness of my life, and I wanted the world to be destroyed in one fell swoop" (Blasim, 2013a, p.36). In his testimony, Hajjar speaks on behalf of millions of Iraqis who are traumatized by war and personal loss. "Testimonial narratives," as Vickroy thinks, "do not just concern individuals but also the individual as a representative of a social class or group assuming relationship and responsibility to others beyond personal interests" (2002, p.5).

Hajjar succeeds in elucidating his traumas and their consequences. Yet, his testimonial narrative has some ambiguities that remain unexplained up to the close of the story. While he is with his comrade Salsal in an isolated villa in Baghdad waiting for orders from their chief, Mr. Salman, to assassinate the Deputy Minister of Culture, Hajjar finds a small egg in the hutch of his rabbit. Salsal denies relation with the whole matter and accuses Umm Dala, their house attendant, of the stunt. Umm Dala, who brought the rabbit after finding it in a public garden, is away for about a week because she is sick. Mr. Salman visits them before four days. Hajjar has been checking the rabbit on a daily basis. Then who puts the egg? "Our biological knowledge," says Shang, commenting on this intricate issue, "tells us that it is impossible for a rabbit to produce an egg at all" (2019, p.69).

Similarly, as Hajjar and Salsal, accompanied by the rabbit, are waiting in their car for the Deputy Minister of Culture to appear so that Hajjar can finish him with his silencer pistol, Salsal receives from the Deputy Minister a photoshopped picture of a rabbit sitting on an egg. Seemingly, the Deputy Minister does not know Salsal personally. However, Salsal, using a fake profile, used to have discussions with the Deputy Minister on Facebook. So, what does this have to do with the egg in the first place? Frustrated and raged, Hajjar goes out of the car to buy a pack of cigar. As he is away from the car, it explodes killing Salsal and the rabbit. Who explodes the car? Is it a car bomb? Why does not the target show up? Is the Deputy Minister involved? Is Salman a double agent? What is the benefit of this suspense? (Maryam et al, 2022).

What is striking about Hajjar's discourse is the presence of so many gaps and things left unsaid. These are not just narrative quirks; they are actually a deeply idiosyncratic feature of testimonial narratives. Unlike traditional or coherent storytelling, which tends to neatly tie events together, testimonial narratives often resist that kind of closure. They are full of voids that the reader is almost invited to fill in, drawing on their own knowledge, imagination, and even emotional intuition. In a way, the reading experience becomes a shared act of meaning-making, where the reader participates in rebuilding what trauma has shattered (Mir, 2023). Vickroy calls these

gaps "effects" that are "narratively dissociative but effectively overdetermined" (2002, p.30).

In his short story "Crosswords" (2013), Blasim speaks about another traumatized Iraqi resting on multiperspectivity, sometimes called polyperspectivity. In multiperspectival narratives, multiple narrators narrate the story whereas every single narrator gives his own viewpoint which enlightens a certain aspect of the narration (Hartner, 2012). For Vickroy, multiperspectivity is "an authorial approach" which "combines testimonial elements with multiple subject positionings." It intermingles "many voices, emotions and experiences" to "produce individual and collective memory and to counteract silence and forgetting." Sometimes, multiple narrators "give first-person testimony, bear witness, for characters silenced by the trauma," which reflects "collective sufferings" (2002, p.27).

"Crosswords," actually, has three narrators: a mysterious narrator, who *could* be Marwan, the main character around whom the whole story revolves, a journalist, Marwan's close friend, and a dead prostitute who lives inside the journalist. Marwan and the journalist have been in a sexual relationship with the prostitute, their high school colleague, before she dies in a car accident as she is going with the journalist to an art gallery. The three narrators are differentiated typographically: the mysterious narrator's interventions appear in a certain font, the journalist's lines are set in another font, and the prostitute's speech is italicized. Moreover, every one of them has a different tone. Morbidly, the mysterious narrator opens the story showing that Marwan is in a hospital. Then, the journalist and the prostitute take turns in narrating the story of Marwan depending on flashbacks.

Marwan, a brilliant crossword puzzle writer who works with the journalist in a newspaper in Baghdad, is traumatized after he miraculously survives a double explosion which has targeted their newspaper building. The journalist clarifies,

> First, they detonated a taxi in front of the magazine's offices. … The second vehicle was a watermelon truck, packed with explosives. The first police patrol to arrive after the first explosion brought three policemen. The murderers waited for people to gather and then detonated the second vehicle. That killed twenty-five people. Two of the policemen were killed on the spot, and their colleague caught fire and began running in every direction. Finally he staggered through the door of the magazine building and collapsed, a lifeless corpse (Blasim, 2013a, p.58).

The prostitute elucidates the extent to which Marwan is hurt, "*the first explosion shredded Marwan's face. The windows shattered and the cupboards fell on top of him. His mouth filled with blood. He spat out teeth. He bled a long time and only recovered consciousness in the hospital*" (Blasim, 2013a, p.57, original italics).

When Marwan wakes up in the hospital, he behaves in a paranoiac way showing that the soul of the policeman, who entered their building running in flames and died, is inside him. The doctor says that this is a symptom of shock. He cynically asks the journalist, "If you'd gone through a terrorist explosion like that, would you come out laughing and joking?" (Blasim, 2003a, p.61). However, the journalist insists that

Marwan is possessed by the deceased policeman: "The doctor was wrong; Marwan wasn't suffering just from shock. The burned policeman had got inside him and had taken control of his being" (Blasim, 2013a, p.61).

Later on, the journalist recalls how Marwan starts to complain, not just about the haunting presence of the dead policeman, but more specifically about the sense of authority this ghostly figure seems to be exerting over him. This moment adds yet another layer of discomfort to the reading experience. The line between the real and the unreal blurs further, unsettling the reader and deepening the story's already fragile sense of narrative stability (Shang, 2019).

When out of the hospital, Marwan shows the symptom of avoidance. He, in the journalist's words "kept to himself at home and didn't want to meet any visitors" (Blasim, 2013a, p.61). "Trauma," says Vickroy, "often involves a radical sense of disconnection and isolation as bonds are broken and relationships and personal safety are put into question. Survivors feel, often justifiably, abandoned or alienated because of their differences with others (2002, p.23). She continues,

> Traumatic reactions verify how circumstances can radically change our behavior and should make us question often-sacralized notions of human self-control and free will. Trauma texts' depictions of the devastating effects of isolation, the necessity for connection, and the cultural influences on private relations and behavior all serve to challenge cultural and often class-based attitudes that define the individual as essentially agential and self-determining (Vickroy, 2002, p.23).

After Marwan returns to his job, hyperarousal starts to pop up on him. He grows irritable. The journalist reflects, "His nerves would flare up for the slightest reason" (Blasim, 2013a, p.64). He afterwards begins to stay up late at nights. Hurt by these symptoms, he attempts to overcome them by drinking alcohol. This strategy is in fact a method that the traumatized follow to medicate themselves from the symptoms of PTSD (Acton, 2012). "Marwan's eyes," the journalist remarks, "turned bloodshot from staying up late and drinking too much" (Blasim, 2013a, p.63). Then, things take an even stranger turn. Marwan begins to show signs of dysfunction at work. As a crossword writer, he is expected to produce clear and clever puzzles, but instead, he starts submitting grids filled with bizarre and incoherent words that do not seem to follow any logical pattern. This shift is not just a symptom of his mental unraveling. Rather, it is a powerful metaphor for the disintegration of meaning in a world shaped by trauma, war, and possession. The very tool he once used to create order, which is language, becomes fractured and unreadable (Sellman, 2022).

Before the end of the story, the journalist regretfully reports that Marwan commits suicide. The prostitute accuses the policeman of inciting him, "*Why couldn't it have been the policeman who incited Marwan to swallow the razor blade?!*" (Blasim, 2013a, p.63, original italics). The story closes with the journalist quarreling with the prostitute. She, seemingly, renders him weary and sleepless, which might allude that the journalist himself is suffering from PTSD. The boundary between witness and victim begins to blur, leaving the reader questioning how deeply the conflict has scarred even those who seem detached (Amir, 2014).

Multiperspectivity makes the readers live through the minds of the characters. Exploring a story narrated by multiple distorted narrators about a protagonist who suffers from paranoiac PTSD makes the readers unconsciously experience the aftermath of trauma. In the story of Marwan, Blasim has mimicked the symptomatology of trauma as he uses multiple narrative voices that highlight the ongoing calamities experienced by the victim. Moreover, the ambiguous end of the story suggests a degree of undecidability that challenges the conventions of fixed meaning. Such reading experience cannot be adequately depicted if the narrator was conventional. "Multiple narrative lines," says Yang, "go hand in hand, kidnapping the reader's mind and forcing the reader to think about the traumatic experience" (2023, p.3). "Readers," Vickroy remarks, "are engaged to help reconstruct experience and retelling as trauma writers expose them to a variety of voices, subject positionings, and symbolizing that highlight the chaotic and disorienting aspects as well as representational possibilities and approximations" (2002, p.27).

Blasim, in his short story "A Thousand and One Knives" (2013), foregrounds two traumatized Iraqis, Jaafar and Umm Ibtisam, depending on flashbacks as a narrative technique. Sometimes called analepsis, flashback is a narrative which represents events that took place before the time at which the story opened in the form of intrusive memories (Abrams & Harpham, 2012).

"A Thousand and One Knives" is narrated by what Vickroy labels "third person narrative voice" (2002, p.11). This narrator gives the readers "assistance in translating unfamiliar experience in order to empathize with it" and helps the writer "achieve an 'intimacy' in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as it goes along." Placed "in the midst of the characters' various, even agitated, levels of consciousness," the readers "are often oriented and receive information via a character's/narrator's memory and consciousness," which engages them "to reconstruct the past, along with the often unwilling characters" (Vickroy, 2002, p.11).

As the third person narrator elucidates to readers, "A Thousand and one Knives" is about a game called the disappearing knife trick which is played by six people. The narrator, his brother-in-law, Jaafar, and two of their friends, Allawi the young and Salih the butcher, have a supernatural ability of making knives disappear by simply gazing at them for a few seconds and shedding tears. While the narrator's wife and Jaafar's sister, Souad, has a magical ability of returning them. As for the last member of the team, Umm Ibtisam, she miraculously finds a plenty of knives in her garden. In four non-chronological episodes, the narrator jumped from a memory to another to shape his story (Shang, 2019).

Jaafar, an old veteran, an on-wheelchair football referee and the head of the knife trick team, has his trauma in the Gulf War in Kuwait when the bombing of the American forces amputate his legs. The narrator reflects, "They sent him off to the Kuwait war, and when he came back both his legs had been amputated" (Blasim, 2013b, p.106). Jaafar suffers afterwards from recurrent disturbing re-experiencing, flashbacks and illusions. He repeatedly, while refereeing, visualizes the stadium as a battlefield and the young players as fighters. The narrator elaborates, "Sometimes his mind would wander and for a few moments he would see them as ghosts in battle and recall the boom of artillery on the front" (Blasim, 2013b, p.107).

In trauma narratives, victims appear to struggle with memory. Their re-experiencing of traumatic events, in Vickroy's words, "can emerge in a wide range of forms, including decontextualized memory fragments" and "transference episodes" where "current life experiences are influenced and distorted by earlier traumas" (2002, p.29).

Umm Ibtisam's trauma comes from losing her husband in a car-bomb explosion in Baghdad. The narrator clarifies,

> The woman had five daughters, and her husband had been killed when a car bomb exploded in front of the Ministry of the Interior, cutting his body in half. It was a disaster. The woman had no idea how she could support her daughters (Blasim, 2013b, p.120).

Umm Ibtisam responds to her catastrophe with heavy grief and begins to experience backbreaking watchfulness. The narrator states that "Her grief for her husband broke her heart and disrupted her sleep" (Blasim, 2013b, p.120). Afterwards, the symptom of distressing re-experiencing appears in her life: "She had nightmares in which she saw an enormous man slaughtering her husband with a knife. The nightmare recurred often, and every time the man would slaughter her husband with a different knife" (Blasim, 2013b, p.120). Umm Ibtisam, unlike Jaafar who is executed by extremists, continues to fight life and taking care of her daughters. Trauma narratives, as Vickroy believes, "focus on changes to the self after undergoing trauma and learning to survive" because "the obsessions and defenses that help the traumatized survive can become relational liabilities" and "resourceful coping mechanisms" which are "needed to overcome the devastating fragmentation often occurring in trauma" (2002, p.27).

Flashback narrative technique, used with the stories of Jaafar and Umm Ibtisam, is the most suitable for narrating trauma narratives because it enables the writer to delve into the past of his characters showing to the readers both their traumas and post-traumatic suffering without any challenges in representation (Jena & Samantray, 2021). Flashbacks, intrusive images and nightmares can trigger memories which contain unconscious and extensive information that the traumatized cannot deliberately access or easily change and here comes the necessity of third person narrator (Craighead et al, 2008).

In his short story "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" (2013), Blasim puts forth a complex case of an Iraqi immigrant resting on the strategy of prolepsis. Sometimes called flash forward, prolepsis is a small narrative which reveals important events of the story that have not yet happened but soon will be narrated in great details (Ganguli & Aggarwal, 2022).

In the opening paragraph of the story, the third person narrator, or "the third person narrative voice" as Vickroy names it (2002, p.11), summarizes the whole story he is about to tell. He clarifies that his story is about an Iraqi man, named Salim Abdul-Husain, who works for Baghdad municipality as a cleaner of the aftermath of explosions and dies in Holland in 2009 under the name Carlos Fuentes. In the next paragraphs, the narrator gives details of Salim's story.

Traumatized by the sights of torn bodies on a daily basis during his work, Salim desires to immigrate to Holland. While cleaning after an explosion one day, he hopes he can find something valuable left over from the explosion victims so he can sell it and buy a visa to go to Holland and escape the hell of Iraq. The narrator reflects,

> Bored and disgusted as on every miserable day, Salim and his colleagues were sweeping a street market after an oil tanker had exploded nearby … They were sweeping the market slowly and cautiously for fear they might sweep up with the debris any human body parts left over … . His only lucky find was a man's finger with a valuable silver ring of great beauty. Salim put his foot over the finger, bent down carefully, and with disgust pulled the silver ring off. He picked up the finger and put it in a black bag where they collected all the body parts. The ring ended up on Salim's finger (Blasim, 2013b, pp.187-8).

Salim, however, does not sell the ring, but he somehow manages to go to his hoped destination. When he reaches Holland, he shows the symptom of avoidance as he desires to avoid everything that reminds him of Iraq and his Iraqi identity. Therefore, he first changes his name into Carlos Fuentes. The narrator elucidates,

> Carlos Fuentes was very happy with his new name, and the beauty of Amsterdam made him happy too. Fuentes wasted no time. He joined classes to learn Dutch and promised himself he would not speak Arabic from then on, or mix with Arabs or Iraqis, whatever happened in life. 'Had enough of misery, backwardness, death, shit, piss, and camels,' he said to himself (Blasim, 2013b, p.189).

He even disavows his origin and begins to "describe the Iraqi people as an uncivilized and backward people who did not know what humanity means. 'They are just savage clans,' he would say" (Blasim, 2013b, p.190).

For a while, Carlos succeeds in inhuming his Iraqi identity. He speaks Dutch fluently, marries a Dutch woman, and becomes a good independent Dutch citizen. He even ridicules his follow immigrants calling them "retarded gerbils" and "Stone Age savages" (Blasim, 2013b, p.190) for reasons pertain to their living there such as their inability to speak Dutch properly and working in restaurants illegally.

However, troubling symptoms float on the surface of his life. He experiences distressing nightmares which turn his new life upside-down. The first nightmare he has is grim. The narrator clarifies,

> In the dream he was unable to speak Dutch. He was standing in front of his Dutch boss and speaking to him in an Iraqi dialect, which caused him great concern and a horrible pain in his head. He would wake up soaked in sweat, then burst into tears (Blasim, 2013b, p.191).

He first thinks that they are just bad dreams which will vanish. But, they keep haunting him. The narrator explains,

> In his dreams, he saw a group of children in the poor district where he was born, running after him and making fun of his new name. They were shouting after him and clapping: 'Carlos the coward, Carlos the sissy, Carlos the silly billy' (Blasim, 2013b, p.191).

Night after night, nightmares continue to ruin his life. In a nightmare, the narrator adds,

> he dreamt that he had planted a car bomb in the center of Amsterdam. He was standing in the courtroom, ashamed and embarrassed. The judges were strict and would not let him speak Dutch, with the intent to humiliate and degrade him. They fetched him an Iraqi translator, who asked him not to speak in his incomprehensible rustic accent, which added to his agony and distress (Blasim, 2013b, pp.191-2).

Attempting to find a solution to his dilemma, Carlos spends hours reading books, which makes him change his diet and habits. For example, he stops eating potatoes because he has read that vegetables which grow inside the earth are the source of nightmares that are about their eater's past. He even starts to do bizarre behaviours. For example, he sleeps wearing a heavy wool coat so that he cannot touch his wife's naked body because he has read that being naked takes the individual to childhood, which leads to quarrels with his wife. "Traumatic experience," as Vickroy believes, "can produce a sometimes indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of an individual's memory, self-recognition, and relational life" (2002, p.11).

One night, as he is sleeping with a military uniform on and a plastic rifle lay beside him, he has his final nightmare. He dreams he is before a burnt building in central Baghdad. He breaks into the building and starts killing everybody with his rifle mercilessly, even the children. However, in the sixth floor, he finds Salim standing beside the window naked with a bloody broom in his hand. Salim's nakedness suggests that Carlos's Iraqiness is integral to his identity. Carlos thinks that this is his long-awaited chance to erase Salim who, apparently, is attempting to sweep his past (Sadek, 2023).

Carlos points his rifle towards Salim's head, but Salim ridicules him by chanting: '"Salim the Dutchman, Salim the Mexican, Salim the Iraqi, Salim the Frenchman, Salim the Indian, Salim the Pakistani, Salim the Nigerian"' (Blasim, 2013b, p.195). Overwhelmed by fear, panic and anger, Carlos lets out a loud scream and rains Salim with bullets. However, Salim avoids them and jumps from the window. Awakened by the scream, Carlos's wife rises and, sticking her head out of the window, she sees a horrific sight: "Carlos Fuentes was dead on the pavement, and a pool of blood was spreading slowly under his head" (Blasim, 2013b, p.195).

The narrator clarifies that Carlos will easily forgive the Dutch newspapers which have described him an Iraqi man, not a Dutch national, who has committed suicide, but he will never forgive his brothers who return his body to Iraq and bury him in Al-Najaf cemetery. Troubled by his history, unable to reconcile past and present, Carlos is left suspended between two times, spaces and identities. He is hanging in a perpetual state of liminality which renders the text incoherent and nightmarish. He tries to forget his traumas by embracing a new identity. However, his past reappears in the

fashion of nightmares, psychosis, and fractured narratives where reality and fiction overlap and intersect (Sadek, 2023).

The story closes with a haunting image: Carlos's corpse lies covered, but his hand remains outstretched, as if reaching for something beyond death. On that hand, the silver ring still glows, strangely luminous, like a sun. It is a powerful and surreal detail that lingers in the reader's mind, symbolizing the permanence of Carlos's entanglement with Iraq, a place that has both claimed and transformed him. In the end, it is not just Carlos who suffers. Salim, the man who carries the weight of witnessing, descends into a psychological state so severe that it strips him of vitality, clarity, and, ultimately, the will to go on. His distress is not dramatic or loud; it is quiet, insidious, and all-consuming, leading him slowly but surely toward his own demise (Al-Masri, 2018).

In using the strategy of prolepsis , Blasim warns his readers that they are about to read a death story of an Iraqi man and, by doing so, he makes them emotionally engaged with the traumatic experience they will read. When the details of the story are unfolded, they come with highly provoking nightmares which do not only convert a man's life into hell, but they also kill him (Bridgeman, 2005). The third person narrator of the prolepsis and its detailed sequel archives, as in "A Thousand and One Knives," an "intimacy" with the readers because he reveals to them certain details that the "unwilling" traumatized protagonist cannot properly share (Vickroy, 2002, p. 11).

Blasim, in his short story titled "The Reality and the Record" (2009) presents a bizarre case of another Iraqi immigrant leaning back on multiple narrators and the strategy of frame story. In a frame story technique, sometimes called frame tale technique, an opening and closing of a single overall unifying story constitutes a frame to include one or more stories. Hence, the frame story becomes a context and a reading guide for the sorry(s) included within it (Kuiper, 2012).

The frame of "The Reality and the Record" consists of only two paragraphs. A main third-person narrator opens his story with a paragraph and closes it with another. Between these two framing paragraphs, another narrator recounts his own testimonial narrative in first-person perspective. The two stories are differentiated typographically; the main narrator's frame is printed in italics while the other narrator's framed story appears in a normal font.

The main narrator speaks of a skinny and fast-talking Iraqi man, in his late thirties, who seeks asylum in Sweden. In the refugee reception office, the man narrates to an officer his strange story hoping that the latter will accept him as a legal refugee. As the man begins talking, it turns out that he is an ambulance driver who works in a hospital in Baghdad and he is traumatized by the horrors of the chaos preceded the fall of Baghdad, especially the Civil War.

One night in the winter of 2006, the ambulance driver says, he is summoned with another driver by the manager of the emergency section in the hospital, whom he calls the Professor, for a mission. They are told to go to the bank of the Tigris immediately. There they find six decapitated bodies of clergymen laid on the bank and six chopped heads wrapped in a sack. As ordered, he takes the heads in his ambulance while the other car takes the bodies. While he is heading to the hospital, an extremist group kidnaps him. Kept in an old house in Baghdad, he explains that he starts to re-experience his trauma and to see intrusive memories and nightmarish illusions:

> I imagined that all the unidentified and mutilated bodies I had carried in the ambulance since the fall of Baghdad lay before me, and that in the darkness surrounding me. I then saw the Professor picking my severed head from a pile of trash, while my colleagues made dirty jokes (Blasim, 2009, p.6).

Afterwards, he says he has experienced problems in sleeping: "I shut my eyes, but I couldn't sleep" (Blasim, 2009, p.7).

The extremist group, he continues, forces him to appear in a videotape which shows him as an Iraqi army officer in uniform. They put the six rotten chopped heads before him and make him confess that he and six of his fellow colleagues, whose heads presumably lying before him, have raped Iraqi women and murdered innocent civilians. Then, he claims that they sell him to another extremist group called "The Islamic Jihad Group, Iraq Branch." This group also forces him to appear in a videotape claiming that he is a member in Al-Mehdi Army which, backed by Iran, decapitates hundreds of Sunnis. He points out that this group sells him again to another Shiite extremist group who also forces him to appear in a videotape claiming that he belongs to Sunni groups whose job is blowing off Shiite mosques and markets.

The ambulance driver says that one time he appears as Spanish solider threatened by a Jihadist asking the Spanish forces to abandon Iraq, though, he exclaims, the Spanish forces has withdrawn from Iraq in 2005. Other time, he goes on, he appears as an Afghan who presents himself as the new leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This video is accompanied by threatening the entire world and slaughtering six men. The ambulance driver then summarizes the experiences he has with other groups:

> Throughout the year and a half of my kidnapping experience, I was moved from one hiding place to another. They shot video of me talking about how I was a treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, a Saudi terrorist, a Syrian Baathist intelligence agent, or a Revolutionary Guard from Zoroastrian Iran. On these videotapes I murdered, raped, started fires, planted bombs, and carried out crimes that no sane person would even imagine. All these tapes were broadcast on satellite channels around the world. Experts, journalists, and politicians sat there discussing what I said and did (Blasim, 2009, p.12).

He tells the officer afterwards that everyone in Iraq wants to kill him and the cameraman in all the kidnapping experiences he had is the Professor but in disguise. The shock comes when he informs the officer that he goes back to his job the very next morning after the night he has been kidnapped! He reflects, "They all told me I hadn't been away for a year and half, because I came back the morning after working that rainy night" (Blasim, 2009, p.13). "Direct testimony," says Vickroy, "resists normal chronological narration of normal modes of artistic representation" because the traumatized "live in durational rather than chronological time" and "they continue to experience the horrors of the past through internal shifts back in time and space rather than experiencing the past as differentiated from the present" (2002, p.5).

It turns out, ultimately, that the ambulance driver is a PTSD-inflicted person and what he narrates is mere hallucinations. In his closing paragraph, the main narrator clarifies that the man then is taken to a psychiatric hospital. In fact, the ambulance driver paints in his testimony a vivid and unsettling picture that captures what could be described as a hermetic space, which is a mental or emotional enclosure, a kind of psychological cocoon. This space is sealed off from the outside world and disconnected

from broader social, cultural, and even historical realities because it exists as a response to overwhelming trauma (Allirajah, 2016).

Frame story technique puts the readers face to face with the traumatized protagonist as he confesses the sufferings he is going through. When the main narrator introduces the ambulance driver to readers and gives him the chance to say his own story, he technically seats him in a confession chair. This strategy enables both the victim to vomit what is buried within the recesses of his mind and the reader to hear out disjointed and hallucinatory yet painful testimonies (Cuddon, 2013). Blasim, as a trauma narrativist, is well aware of implementing this authorial strategy in his stories. "Writers," says Vickroy, "acknowledge a responsibility to reveal the uncertainties, complexities, and paradoxes of telling and to recognize that traumatic experience is driven by alienating and terrifying aspects of it that resist speech, resolutions, and categories of analysis more common to normal contexts" (2002, pp.34-35).

Presented within ingredients of the grotesque, the unnatural, the fantastical, and the macabre, Blasim's short stories are about trauma and the traumatized. They demonstrate the emotional, psychological, and mental influences of wars on the Iraqi people (Sadek, 2023). In the five short stories selected, the experience of violence destabilizes the characters, causing trauma and sometimes bringing out a ferocity that has its own gruesome results (Al-Masri, 2018). "Though generally seen as a writer on the Iraq war," says Shang commenting on the post-traumatic nature of Blasim's stories, "Blasim does not directly write about the war. Instead, he attempts to depict what post-war Iraq is like. In his writings, the side effects of the war are more fearful and disastrous than the war itself" (2019, pp.67-8).

5. Conclusion

All the characters in Blasim's five short stories are Iraqi citizens from almost all the strata of society. They have been traumatized by man-made conflicts and wars. Hajjar's trauma comes from the American fighters bombing Baghdad before 2003 and from the Civil War in 2006. Marwan and Umm Ibtisam are traumatized by the explosions that follow the American invasion of Iraq. Jaafar carries the psychological scars of trauma left by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. As for Salim and the ambulance driver, they are traumatized by the brutal chaos and sectarian violence that erupted during the Civil War of 2006.

The cost those people paid is diverse yet backbreaking. Hajjar loses his two brothers and becomes a killer, Marwan, Jaafar, and Salim lose their lives, Umm Ibtisam loses her husband and becomes a breadwinner for her five orphaned daughters, and the ambulance driver turns maniac and is kept in a psychiatric hospital. Blasim fulfills his responsibility as a trauma narrativist in criticizing these catastrophes and historicizing their consequences by putting them in a work of literature. By doing so, he engraves them in the cultural memory of the world.

An attentive reading of Blasim's short stories can easily reveal his appeal to readers to read about the horrific cost of the wars which Iraqis witnessed. He is after shaping an understanding and awareness of Iraq's traumas. He also desires to transmit the response to the traumas that his Iraqi characters have to readers. Accordingly, he attains a sense of truth as he effectively introduces the disturbing states of his characters and reflects the distressing state of reality. Hence, he allows readers to recognize the traumas that have afflicted his characters and witness their inner chaos. This is

specifically significant since it suggests a signal of identification that invites readers to accompany the victim in listening to his or her story.

To achieve his aims, Blasim abandons the traditional conventions of narratology in short stories as they are incompatible with his project. He resorts to experimental narrative techniques such as first/third person testimony, multiperspectivity, flashback, prolepsis and frame story, which results in nonlinear and disrupted stories. He also employs some somato-sensory devices such as dreams, nightmares, illusions, and hallucinations. The reason for adopting such literary techniques and somato-sensory symbols is to mimic the form and the consequences of trauma and, thus, engaging the readers in empathy and critical thinking. The result of Blasim's approach is fascinating because his short stories brim with psychological depth, visceral realism, ethical engagement, socio-political critique, cultural memory, fragmented narration, embodied trauma and reader immersion.

It can be concluded that Blasim's five short stories studied have the content, form, and aims of trauma narratives as legislated by Vickroy. Therefore, they can be read as trauma narratives which echo in their pages the plight of Iraqis.

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Abstract in Arabic

أصداء محنة العراقيين: قراءة مختارات من القصص القصيرة لحسن بلاسم بوصفها سرديات صدمة

الخلاصة

لقد لعب الأدب دوراً أساسياً في تأطير معاناة الناجين من الصدمات، مشيراً إلى صلة وثيقة بين الاستعارات الأدبية والأعراض السريرية. ومع ذلك، فإن ما شدد عليه العديد من الكُتّاب ليس الاستمرارية الحتمية للصدمة عبر التاريخ، بل التحولات التي أدّت إلى بلورة مفهوم ما بعد الصدمة وتحويله إلى قوة سردية وثقافية. قد سجّل بعض الكُتّاب العراقيين بشكلٍ واضح مظاهر هذه الصدمات وما خلّفته من آثار نفسية واجتماعية عاشها العراقيون عبر مراحل متعددة من تاريخهم. وقد أظهر أرباب السرد العراقي المعاصرون طبيعة الصدمة وتنوّع أشكالها ونتائجها في نتاجهم الروائي. ولا يُعدّ حسن بلاسم استثناءً من ذلك؛ إذ كرس مجموع أعماله القصصية القصيرة لتصوير ما مرّ به الشعب العراقي منذ عام 1980 وحتى ما بعد عام 2003. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نظرية "سرديات الصدمة" التي بلورتها الأستاذة الجامعية الأميركية والباحثة في مجال نظرية الصدمة لوري فيكروي. ومن هذا المنطلق، تسعى الدراسة إلى قراءة خمس قصص قصيرة من أعمال بلاسم بوصفها سرديات صدمة تركز على الآثار النفسية المدمّرة للحروب التي يعاني منها الأفراد في مناطق النزاع.