



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies
مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

Incarcerated Selves: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Political Imprisonment in Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Basem Khandakji's *A Mask the Colour of the Sky*

Prof. Dr. Ansam Riyadh Abdullah Almaarof

Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq

Tikrit University- College of Education for Women- English Department

Abstract

This paper explores the psychological and political prison in narrative, character, and form in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Basem Khandakji's *A Mask the Color of the Sky*. Utilizing Michel Foucault's conception of institutional power and discipline and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as a framework, the paper examines how, for both novels, incarceration is represented not just as a place of physical confinement but also as a state of moral obliteration, uncertainty of identity and the degradation of the person by the institution. At the centre of the argument is the claim that both novelists, though born in markedly different cultural and political coordinates, the American South (racially segregated) and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, are expressive of a prison as the site of body repression, memory manipulation and self-discipline. This project seeks to understand how victims find meaning, retain moral agency, and negotiate trauma in dehumanising oppressive carceral systems. It raises the following question: How are the novels depicting confinement as both a political and personal condition? How have these accounts also made use of narrative strategies to depict trauma and resistance? How do memory silence and introspection function as acts of agency or survival? Methodologically, the analysis relies on comparative close reading and discourse analysis which foregrounds symbolic structures, interior monologue, and the aesthetics of



silence. It concludes that *The Nickel Boys* challenges racism as a system compound of narrative irony and historical realism, and *A Mask the Color of the Sky* explores existential reflection, spirituality, and love as means of psychic survival, manifestations that Israel must investigate in the face of its life in the confinement. In the end, both texts suggest that the imprisoned self is not passive but dialogic, that it converses with the systems of power even as it's silenced by them.

Keywords: prison literature, trauma theory, Foucault, psychological imprisonment, carceral power, narrative resistance, Colson Whitehead, Basem Khandakji, comparative literature, introspection, Resilience.

الذوات المسجونة: دراسة مقارنة للسجن النفسي والسياسي في رواية كولسون وايتيهد أولاد النيكل
ورواية باسم خندقجي قناع بلون السماء

أ. د. أنسام رياض عبد الله المعروف

Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq

جامعة تكريت - كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة السجن النفسي والسياسي في البنية السردية، والشخصيات، والأسلوب في روايتي أولاد النيكل لكولسون وايتيهد وقناع بلون السماء لباسم خندقجي. ومن خلال توظيف مفهوم ميشيل فوكو عن السلطة المؤسسية والانضباط، إلى جانب نظرية الصدمة لدى كاثيرين كاروث، تفحص الدراسة كيف يتم تمثيل السجن في الروايتين ليس كمكان للاحتجاز الجسدي فحسب، بل كحالة من المحو الأخلاقي، وضياح الهوية، وتدهور الذات تحت سلطة المؤسسة. تركز



الحجة الأساسية على أن كلا الروائيين، رغم ولادتهما في سياقات ثقافية وسياسية متباينة تمامًا جنوب الولايات المتحدة في ظل الفصل العنصري، والنضال الفلسطيني تحت الاحتلال الإسرائيلي يقدمان تصورًا للسجن بوصفه موقعًا لقمع الجسد، وتلاعب الذاكرة، وتطوير الذات. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى فهم كيفية إيجاد الضحايا للمعنى، واحتفاظهم بالوكالة الأخلاقية، وتفاوضهم مع الصدمة في أنظمة قمعية ولا إنسانية. وتطرح الدراسة الأسئلة التالية: كيف تُصوّر الروايتان الحبس كحالة سياسية وشخصية في آن واحد؟ وكيف تستثمران الاستراتيجيات السردية لتصوير الصدمة والمقاومة؟ وما دور الذاكرة، والصمت، والتأمل الداخلي بوصفها أفعالًا للنجاة أو الوكالة؟ منهجيًا، تعتمد الدراسة على القراءة المقارنة الدقيقة والتحليل الخطابية الذي يُبرز البنى الرمزية، والمونولوج الداخلي، وجماليات الصمت. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن رواية أولاد النيكل تتحدى العنصرية كنظام مركب من السخرية السردية والواقعية التاريخية، بينما تستكشف رواية قناع بلون السماء التأمل الوجودي، والروحانية، والحب كوسائل للبقاء النفسي، وهي تجليات يجب على إسرائيل أن تواجهها في ظل واقعها الاستيطاني وفي النهاية، تقترح الروايتان أن الذات المسجونة ليست ذاتًا سلبية، بل حوارية، تدخل في حوار مع أنظمة السلطة حتى حين تُكتم بالصمت الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب السجن، نظرية الصدمة، فوكو، السجن النفسي، السلطة الكارستيرية، المقاومة السردية، كولسون وايتهد، باسم خندقجي، الأدب المقارن، التأمل الذاتي، الصمود.

1. Introduction

As an institution and symbol, the prison has long been used as a metaphor for the struggle against structures of oppression by the individual. In contemporary global writing, the figure of incarceration encompasses more than physical privation but implicates psychic, political, and ethical forms of constraint sought through the agency of the nation-state, racial rank orders, and colonial oppression



as well of course historical trauma. This paper conducts a comparative literary reading of two such narratives, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and Basem Khandakji's *A Mask the Color of the Sky* (Qinā'un bi-lawn al-samā', 2022), to explore how psychological and political imprisonment become internalized and narrated under very different historical and cultural circumstances: racially segregated America and occupied Palestine.

Colson Whitehead (b. 1969) is an African American, world-renowned writer, who has largely focused his work on questioning the historical legacy of racism, violence and systemic injustice in American history. Recipient of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, *The Nickel Boys* is an eerie, gripping historical novel inspired by the Dozier School for Boys in Florida, a reform school that terrorized African American boys for 111 years, torturing and killing scores of young lives (Kakutani, 2019). In the character of Elwood Curtis, Whitehead distils the psychological degradations and moral compromises of a little good man, idealistic and inspired yet confined in the shell of a system. 'Whitehead demonstrates that imprisonment is the deprivation not only of freedom but of a twisted moral code forced upon the self' (p. 22).

Meanwhile, Basem Khandakji (b. 1983), a Palestinian writer, journalist, and political detainee has authored some of the most compelling prison works to have emerged in the Arab world, despite having been held in an Israeli prison since 2004. "His new book *A Mask the Color of the Sky* embodies long-term



imprisonment in the shade of occupation not just in the physical reality but also in that the soul of the prisoner evolves, and the soul energy is transformed. The hero is a political prisoner called Nour, whose spiritual odyssey, steeped in love, beauty and internal resistance, flies in the face of the standard stereotypical profile of militancy. As Hasso (2023) notes,

“Khandakji’s writing restory[s] the Palestinian prisoner as a political figure, but also as an aesthetic and ethical subject engaged in a perpetual project of subjectivity through and against erasure” (p. 145).

Though the two texts were produced in two different socio-political contexts, namely, Jim Crow America and occupied Palestine, they both share an engagement with institutional violence and the carceral structures that aim to wipe out the individual. This paper opposes that the selected novels depict incarceration as a dynamic dialectic of agencies of repression and resistance. In doing so, the two authors utilise narrative tropes of introspective storytelling, fractured memory and symbolic imagery to represent the imprisoned self as a sphere of moral and philosophical struggle.

Using Michel Foucault’s (1977) theory of disciplinary power and Cathy Caruth’s (1996) trauma theory, this article seeks to explore the ways that carceral systems refashion the body as well as the mind. The place of confinement in the protagonists’ lives shows us the way in which pain is lived, told, and remembered, and how their memory, broken, repressed, or invented, serves as a



medium of both suffering and preservation. The dissertation also explores how writing and storytelling become an act of resistance, a discursive field where one can recover agency in a narrative designed for erasure.

Examining these two classics of prison writing, this study sets them in the context of wider discourses of trauma, resistance and the aesthetics of the carceral. It implicitly inquires; how does the confined self tell its survival under the massive state institutional violence? And what does this suggest more broadly about the human potential, the resistance, the reflection, the imagination of freedom within spaces that try to contain us?

2. Literature Review

Today, prison literature does more than record confinement; it questions how incarceration re-constitutes the self through trauma, memory, institutional violence, and political repression. By examining the psychological and political implications of incarceration in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and Basem Khandakji's *A Mask the Colour of the Sky* (2022), this paper contributes to theoretical discussions of trauma theory, postmodern selfhood and Foucauldian disciplinary power. The literature examined here demonstrates the depth and breadth of those studies of memory, identity, and confinement, and also reveals a lacuna with respect to a comparative examination of Western and Arab carceral narratives in terms of both trauma and power theory.



Almaarroof and Jasim (2025) discuss the instability or fragmentation of the self in postmodern literature using Samuel Beckett's *Not I* as the basis for their analysis (p.16). According to these writers, the postmodern subject is fractured and confined by its psychological interiority. Their observation that “the voice in postmodern novels quite frequently |..... becomes a figure for existential crisis and fractured identity” (p. 409) is congruent with the narrational voices in the novels of both Whitehead and Khandakji. The imprisoned subjects in these texts embody postmodern alienation, speaking from abysses within and influenced by both institutional and existential dynamics.

Moreover, Rostam and Almaarroof (2024) explore how memory and imagination facilitate psychological survival in troubled states by means of attachment theory. Their formulation of imagination "operat[ing] as a compensatory device to fill emotional voids resulting from disrupted attachments" (p. 2068) provides a useful construct for understanding how *A Mask the Colour of the Sky* mobilizes spiritual yearning and romantic memory as acts of dissent. In *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood Curtis's idealism and the world as it should be, based on King, are psychic protective barriers against racialized brutality.

Trauma theory has become an important lens through which to understand how people perceive and relate accounts of suffering. For Caruth (1996), trauma is and can never be assimilated, being present only in belated or incoherent forms. This theoretical position is also in use in Almaarroof and Isa's (2024) analysis of



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut, in which trauma shatters linear time and traditional narrative cohesion. They argue that trauma “splinters not only memory, but also time, narrative logic, and identity formation” (p. 10) which resonates with the non-linear structures and introspective dislocations in both *The Nickel Boys* and *A Mask the Colour of the Sky*. These are also novels that tend to depend on broken timelines, fallout, and interiority to inhabit trauma.

In addition to institutional critique popping up time and again, Schlosser (2021) posits that prison writing frequently serves as a counter-archive or a way to challenge prescribed uses of history to retrieve voices that have been silenced. With *The Nickel Boys*, he revisits a dark passage in America’s history of racist barbarism to craft a deeply moving, and depressingly relevant, fictionalised testimony against the American grain of structural injustice. Writing from within the Israeli prison system, Khandakji employs poetic introspection and spiritual figurativeness to present an internal resistance that refuses the power of the physical body.

Foucault’s (1977) research on confinement as a disciplinary machine remains influential in critical engagements with carceral texts. His idea of the “docile body,” a subject that is formed under constant surveillance and regulation, arises in both novels. Whitehead presents the Nickel Academy as a state-run mechanism for racialized control, while for Khandakji the ideological and physical compulsion left behind by an occupation endures. Still, both writers



challenge Foucauldian determinism, emphasizing their character 's mental independence, imagination, and ethical volition.

From Palestinian literature, recent prison narratives are no longer steeped in political didacticism but increasingly are characterized by aesthetics and personal voice (Hasso, 2023). Khandakji's novel is very much part of this new trend, a new seriousness where politics is mixed with poetic and philosophical seriousness. In the African American tradition, Whitehead is the latest in a line of writers, Richard Wright and James Baldwin are two of his obvious predecessors, drawing personal trauma into a broader critique of systemic racism and historical erasure.

In spite of these excellent single-case analyses, little has been done to compare cases across cultural and geopolitical conditions. Few studies have collectively analyzed Anglophone and Arab prison memoirs of confinement as political punishment and psychological decomposition. Second, although the lens of trauma theory has been directed independently toward texts from both the West and the Arab world, it is seldom employed as a bridge of comparative analysis. This paper helps to bridge this gap by placing Whitehead and Khandakji in dialogic tension, and by disregarding the huge gulf of (spatial and temporal) difference between the prison as they experienced it in Khandakji's Palestine of 1980, and Whitehead's American South of 1962 (the year his fictional protagonist, reimagining Khandakji's character, arrives at Rawlins), exploring



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

instead how their literary representations of prison trauma express shared struggles to establish identity, find justice, and maintain moral integrity amid Pyre's contemporaneity.

3. Methodology

The present study is a comparative qualitative literary analysis based on textual analysis and interpretative rhetoric. The plan is to examine the depiction of psychological and political incarceration in Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and Khandakji's *A Mask the Colour of the Sky* and to explore how trauma and institutional oppression and memory and identity become constructed and represented in narrative form, images, and characterization. By focusing on texts from two varied geopolitical and cultural spaces, American and Palestinian, this study highlights the universal and particular experiences of carceral trauma.

It is through a comparative approach that we may explore thematic and formal affinities between and within cultures, along with differences in literary approaches determined by sociopolitical circumstances. The two novels serve as primary source material, and they are examined for narrative construction, point of view, temporal fractures, symbolic structures, and treatments of selfhood in confinement.



4. Theoretical Framework

The author situates the analysis within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that is grounded in trauma theory and Foucauldian discourse on power and discipline, but which also emerges from postmodernist theories of self and memory.

The concept of trauma as put forth by Cathy Caruth, and especially as she has formulated it in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), will serve as a device through which to analyse the fragmented, non-linear narrative in both novels. Caruth insists that trauma is not comprehensible at the moment of experience; it is "unmasterable" and returns in the form of fragmented memories, silence, and repetition. The main characters, Elwood Curtis and Nour, perform this with scattered timelines, introspective monologues, and how trauma is not cleanly or wholly narrated. Their identities are built around the void of violence, demonstrating how literature becomes a place for the belated processing of trauma. Silverman, (1996) states that:

"Trauma is experienced not so much in 'visual images,' then, as in an involuntary repetition that refuses a symbolic inscription or narrative understanding, which may bring out the extent to which the 'visual' itself, as a means of reproducibility, belongs to the order of the symbolic. To re-member is actually to repeat", (p. 5)

L. C. Parker, in his turn, claims that "Trauma occurs too soon, too unexpectedly to be cognized and therefore cannot be accessible to consciousness until it



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

inscribes itself again, over and over, in the dream and action of its survivor” (cited in Caruth, 1996, p. 4). This theory can serve to situate both texts as testimonies of survival and resistance, in which remembering is both obligatory and painful.

Indeed, it is Foucault’s theorisation of the husband as cancer concerning the carceral state and disciplinary power described in Discipline and Punish that lies behind Skinner's analysis of the power of institutional structures over the body and mind. Foucault explains that contemporary institutions such as prisons and reform schools function by more than the confinement of bodies which mould consciousness and identity through monitoring, normalizing, and correcting.

In The Nickel Boys, the Nickel Academy is a torturous disciplinary machine in which Black boys are brutalized under the pretext of reform. In Khandakji’s novel, the Israeli prison as an institution works the same way, it seeks to depoliticize and emotionally and spiritually cripple the Palestinian prisoners. And yet both heroes recoil from this process, building a subterranean moral self. This reflects Foucault’s opinion that:

“The body [is] in a political field... power relations [have] an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it...” (Foucault, 1977, p. 25).

Through a Foucauldian lens, we may understand the novels as literary case studies of how state power disciplines bodies while ultimately remaining unable to eradicate moral reflection and spiritual defiance.



Almaarroof and Jasim (2025) and Rostam and Almaarroof (2024) enrich the theory by stressing the postmodern fragmentation of the self and the function of imagination and memory in rebuilding identity. These are important concepts for considering how the novels subvert linear narratives and deploy interior monologue, poetic symbols, and imagined futures to resist confinement. Memory is both a weapon of survival and a cause of pain. For Elwood and Nour, knowing what is outside the prison wall is as necessary to keep a sense of identity that institutions strive to expunge. The imagined commitments they form are tied to an idea of justice, love, spiritual integrity and so on, and this amounts to what Rostam and Almaarroof (2024) label as "imaginative compensation for severed real-world connections" (p. 2069).

Unified, this theory affirms a multi-level reading of both novels: an anatomy of the incarcerated self as it is constructed, dismembered, and reconstructed through trauma, power, and imagination. Trauma theory, Foucauldian power analysis, and postmodern constructions of identity thus offer a compelling critical framework with which to attend to the aesthetic and political stakes of such carceral narratives.

5. Comparative Analysis: Selves and silence

The titles of both novels are highly symbolic. The Nickel Boys calls forth not only the name of the abusive reform school but also the devaluation of the lives of its victims, nickel as in the cheap metal, the diminished currency of human



worth. Meanwhile, A Mask the Colour of the Sky is also a nod to camouflage, introspection and transcendence, a suggestion that the self in prison must merge with the infinite (the sky) to survive the finite violence of carceral life.

Both Whitehead and Khandakji use fractured, nonlinear narrative structures to mimic the psychic disorientation of incarcerated men. In *The Nickel Boys* time is divided between the 1960s and the 2010s, establishing what Caruth (1996) views as a “belated structure” of trauma, in which memory can only be fully articulated in retrospect (p. 8). Once the audiobook's first narrator deploys a Southern accent to impersonate Elwood himself, in Part 4, the shocking discovery is that the protagonist’s voice has belonged all along not to Elwood but to Turner, who has taken Elwood’s name after his murder, a stand-in for how trauma shatters not simply identity but narrative coherence. In this moment we see how trauma doesn’t simply mute, it transmogrifies identity. Turner inhabits a haunted self, broken and overlaid by Elwood's ethical imagination. He is a sepulchre incarnate: “He would go by Elwood now. It was what he had of him. That was what he had for himself” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 198). This post-traumatic identity displacement reflects what Almaarroof and Jasim (2025) term the "broken and restricted" postmodern subject. Turner doesn't incorporate his trauma but displaces it into a borrowed name, a borrowed voice. Even decades later, in the show's present-day timeline, Turner can't let himself talk about the truth: "There was no real reason to tell anyone. No one would believe it, and



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 1-2 - حزيران 2025)

what good would it do?" (p. 203). Institutional silence has been internalized, and trauma is narrated in a voice that never quite feels like its speaker's own.

Khandakji's storytelling in *A Mask Color of the Sky* also depends on introspection of thought. Nour's voice is reflective, alternating between memories of love, meditations on art, spiritual yearning and the odd hallucination. The nonlinear setting blurs the lines of past, present, and dreamt future. According to Rostam and Almaarof (2024), these imaginative reconstructions are indispensable to the survival of the self when attachments "have become inaccessible as a result of confinement" (p. 2070). Therefore, by contrast with the first novel, Nour emerges as a poet of confinement. Even though political prisoner, Nour presents his interior life with aesthetic sensitivity and philosophical insight. His love for Yasmin, a woman he has never been able to touch, becomes an act of metaphysical survival, a mask of moral integrity he puts on to sustain himself in the face of cosmic putrefaction. "A dagger is narrow, / So am I, but my love is / A universe." My pain has Its beauty's Mission" (Khandakji, 2022, p. 112). This poem of self-fashioning casts even suffering as a medium for transcendence. His self-reflection is not silence but a counter-discourse that feigns spiritual presence.

In the novel, Nour's internal monologue serves as resistance. In one passage he composes in his prison notebook, "Every night before I go to sleep, I invent my mother's voice. She calls to me, not the number they gave me, but to me, to



Nour. That's how I know I exist" (94). Here, the memory becomes an act of performativity, performed as self-preservation, not unlike Turner assuming the name Elwood. But unlike Turner, who seems emotionally and politically muted, Nour's fantasy is a full-throttled act of survival. The role of silence in these two novels varies. In *The Nickel Boys*, silence is enforced, by the institution, by trauma, by society's refusal to come to grips with historical racism. Elwood's is a literal silencing through death and Turner's is a metaphorical one through the inability to speak. The exhumation of those unmarked graves decades later is similarly haunted by bureaucratic deflection and public apathy: "The state released a statement expressing regret that such a thing had happened and hoped the community could heal" (p. 210). In this case, institutional silencing also serves as an erasure.

But in *A Mask the Colour of the Sky*, silence is a choice, and an aestheticised one. Nour employs silence not as a vacuum but as a guarded place of selfhood. He ponders: "The sky never speaks, but I believe it. But I have also begun to say less and to feel instead. That is how I do not break" (p. 101). Silence becomes an inner tactic, a Sufi-like withdrawal that creates space for moral clarity and inner resistance. Instead of succumbing to the abjection of confinement, Nour channels it into a poetic mode of reflection. This comes in agreement with the (Almaarroof & Mahdi, 2024) opinion that one of the great steps to achieve Sufism for any individual is to keep positive and creative silence.



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 1-2 - حزيران 2025)

Structurally, the two novels also provide different ways of making sense of time and identity. Whitehead's novel makes narrative fragmentation and dramatic irony do the work of demonstrating the way trauma obliterates linear selfhood. Khandakji, by contrast, wears its temporal fluidity on its sleeve, telling a story of empowerment in which the past, present, and imagined future coalesce in a stirring voice that refuses to be narrowed. Elwood dies and his story is narrated by someone else; Nour lives, but as the creator of, and sustainer of, his own private mythology.

Both authors reach a common philosophical conclusion: the incarcerated self, modelled into shape by an external force, nevertheless holds some irreducible nugget of agency. Be it through poetic reflection, or the haunted absence of silence, neither Turner nor Nour can accept the total subsumption of the self in carceral regimes. They live in its afterlife of violence, but they do live, speak and remember. In both books, the character hangs on not what is done but on what is thought, reflected on, and morally endured. Elwood Curtis is a believer in justice and he's quoting Dr. King the whole time. His ledgers of virtue are the psychological shield that keeps him pure, but they also get him killed. Turner, who ekes out a living under the name Elwood, internalizes his friend's rectitude in a post-traumatic recasting of self.

“Even in the after-world, Elwood was able to give him something. A voice to speak in” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 200). This shift mirrors Foucault's belief that



power attempts to control not only external action but internal attitudes. But the novel suggests that even in defeat, moral influence endures.

By contrast, Nour is a brooding, poetic character whose existence depends on aesthetic and emotional ties. His love for a woman, whom he has not even touched, becomes synonymous with hope, faith, and metaphysical transcendence. He is writing, imagining, and remembering in order to keep the soul alive.

A dagger is narrow, I am narrow, but my love becomes a universe. My pain has a purpose by its beauty" (Khandakji, 2022, 112). This representation corroborates Almaarouf and Isa's (2024) claim that trauma "is reconfigured through internal beauty and storytelling" (p. 12), particularly in postcolonial prison narratives that oppose victimization through symbolic abundance.

Whitehead's language feels cold, stripped down and clinical in a way that mirrors his characters' emotional numbness. When violence does happen, the detachment in which it is described is eerie and plays into the normalization of violence. The nickel itself becomes a motif of cheapness, cheapening, expendability and fake value, a literal and figurative cheap-as-nicke-piece-of-candy-looking fakeness.

Khandakji, however, uses lyric and poetic language, full of metaphors of the sky, birds, light and lovers. The mask becomes the performative image of survival, Nour has to conceal his true self in order to prevent the death of the soul. The sky,



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

endlessly invoked, is an endless horizon of faith, memory and identity beyond the bars imprisoning him.

These divergent aesthetics embody two cultural reactions to incarceration: exposure and irony in the African-American tradition and spiritual inwardness and poetic perseverance in Palestinian literature. But that is a second-order consideration: the fact is that both serve to rehumanize their imprisoned subject.

Both of these qualities have been foregrounded as the distinct but interlocking aims of literary critics. Kakutani (2019) claims that “there is a muted scream beneath historical silence” of Whitehead’s pared-down prose in *The Nickel Boys*, Hasso (2023) proposes, “Khandakji’s novel “is a metaphysical reorientation of the prison novel,” dissolving political testimony into Sufi-inflected lyricism (p. 139). Both criticisms endorse the power of the novels to convert silence into speech, trauma into narrative, and captivity into spiritual introspection.

Via separate but connected narrative and symbolic means, *The Nickel Boys* and *A Mask in the Color of the Sky* reveal how psychological and political processes of incarceration operate. Grounded in trauma theory, Foucauldian critique, and postmodern identity theory, both texts reveal that the imprisoned self can be shattered but not destroyed, by life as well as death—and can endure, metamorphose, and fight back through ethical remembering and imaginative self-investigation. And that is not all they have in common: it is about how in the



portrayal of pain the soul still narrates even when it is in the prison of the maximum control.

6. Conclusion

Drawing on Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and Khandakji's *A Mask the Color of the Sky* (2022), this comparative analysis has suggested that both novels portray imprisonment not as an exclusively state-endorsed punishment, but as a fraught, bifocal quality of political subjugation and personal making. In light of trauma theory, Foucauldian discourse of institutional discipline, and postmodern theories of memory and selfhood, this project has analyzed how both authors represent imprisonment as a totalizing structure that attempts to annihilate subjectivity, at the same time it engenders ethical resistance and imaginative survival.

In both of these texts, confinement functions at two levels. Politically, the carceral institution, be it the Nickel Academy in Jim Crow America or the Israeli prison in occupied Palestine, is a tool of state power, working to discipline, subdue, and reeducate its prisoners. Building on Foucault's (1977) theory of surveillance and punishment, the two novels reveal that prisons work to manufacture what he calls "docile bodies," they efface the subjectivity and agency of the people who are detained in them.

And yet, imprisonment is also very personal and psychological. The characters of Elwood in *The Nickel Boys* and Nour in *A Mask the Color of the Sky* both



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 1-2 - حزيران 2025)

suffer an internal disintegration of self when confined. The prison is not just a place where the body is restrained; it is also a mental cauldron where identity is cooked down, separated, and reconstituted in the past through memory, in the present through moral dilemma and in the increasingly falsifying glass of introspection. There's been this institutionalized power that enters the soul, it doesn't dominate the soul completely, there's always that little something that each of the protagonists is grasping for, some sort of ethical, spiritual coherence that resists the state's effort to engulf and own everything.

Both of these novels incorporate the narrative form as a means to express trauma and activism. Whitehead adopts a stripped-down impersonal style and shreds the timeline to show how trauma cleaves the psyche. The belated revelation that it isn't Elwood narrating but Turner, who becomes Elwood in name, is a narrative enactment of traumatic substitution, in which the ghost of the one who doesn't make it persists in the very survivor. This is in keeping with Caruth's (1996) theory that trauma is not amenable to straightforward, simple storytelling but rather comes to light by belated, fractured telling of the story.

Khandakji's narrative, on the other hand, is lyrical and meditative, a fusion of temporal fluidity and spiritual yearning. Nour's imprisonment is not only political; it is existential, and his survival is predicated upon a form of aesthetic resistance: writing, remembering, and imagining become weapons of endurance. Here, trauma is visualized not as an explosive break but as a gradual spiritual



Kirkuk University Journal
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

corrosion countered through inner creativity. As Hasso (2023) contends, the Palestinian prison narrative is progressively moving from a manifesto to an artistic and philosophical method of resistance.

Both heroes utilise memory and self-reflection not just as images of trauma, but as modes of survival. Elwood's and Turner's belief systems, in *The Nickel Boys*, are rooted in recollection of a just world, a world imagined by the voice of Dr. King and via Elwood's personal history. These memories push back against the academy's dehumanization, providing a moral guide that survives the institution itself.

In *A Mask the Color of the Sky* as well, Nour's recollection of love, his fictive discussions, and his ruminations on beauty and art make up a refusal to be reduced to naked life. The carceral system, notes Foucault, works not only to regulate action but thought. But Nour's reflective inner life is a sanctuary the state cannot infiltrate. For, silence, here, is not a lack but a space of guarded selfhood, an act of tactical concealment and self-preservation.

In both books, the power of telling, to be exercised by either the author or the character, is ultimately itself an assertion of agency. The voice of the incarcerated self asserts meaning where the institution has attempted to erase it.

This paper argues that both novels, originating in different places and traditions, arrive at a similar philosophical understanding: that the imprisoned self is not a passive entity. Within monitoring, silence and control, the human subject still



thinks, feels, remembers and narrates. And it is these acts, of remembering justice, of dreaming of love, of writing from the pain of life itself, that constitute the resistance of the prisoner. Trauma deforms, but it does not annihilate, the voice; confinement degrades, but it cannot wholly erase the self. In comparing the two selected novels, it becomes clear that both novels, though born of distinct political contexts, racial segregation in Jim Crow America and settler-colonial imprisonment in occupied Palestine, converge in their portrayal of carceral trauma. Stylistically, Whitehead employs sparse, restrained prose to mirror institutional numbness, while Khandakji crafts a lyrical, metaphor-rich language that elevates the inner world of the prisoner. Narratively, *The Nickel Boys* fractures time to reveal trauma's delayed revelation, culminating in the substitution of identity, whereas Khandakji's fluid temporality blends memory, dream, and introspection to preserve the self. In terms of resistance, Turner resists through posthumous memory and moral absorption, while Nour defies erasure through poetic reflection and spiritual transcendence. Both works affirm that even within systems designed to annihilate subjectivity, the human soul narrates, remembers, and resists. Ultimately, these novels testify that in the blackest architectures of control, the soul seems indestructible.

References

Almaarroof, A. R. A., & Isa, Z. (2024). **Exploring trauma: Trauma theory perspective on Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five.** *Journal of English Language*



for Linguistics and Literary Studies, 2(2), 5–15.

<https://jellls.aliraqia.edu.iq/index.php/jellls/article/view/28/17>

Almaarroof, A. R. A., & Jasim, A. A. (2025). **Self and identity concepts in postmodernism: A study of Samuel Beckett's Not I.** *Journal of Language Studies*, 9(1), 407–415.

Almaarroof, A. R. A., & Mahdi, M. A. (2024). **Sufism in Doris Lessing's The Four Gated City.** *Journal Of Language Studies*, 8(11), 191-205. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Foucault, M. (1977). **Discipline and punishment: The birth of the prison** (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.

Hasso, F. S. (2023). **Resistance writing and aesthetics in Palestinian prison literature.** *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 19(2), 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-10512617>

Kakutani, M. (2019, July 12). **'The Nickel Boys'** is a wrenching novel of racism and brutality. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/books/review/colson-whitehead-nickel-boys.html>

Khandakji, B. (2022). **Qinā 'un bi-lawn al-samā'** [A Mask the Color of the Sky]. Dar Al-Ahlia.



Najdat Kadhim Moosa, D. (2007). **Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation.**

Kirkuk University Journal: Humanity Studies, 2(2), 1-6.

https://kujhs.uokirkuk.edu.iq/article_43394.html

Rostam, S. U., & Almaarof, A. R. (2024). **The relation of memory, imagination, and the individual according to attachment theory: A study of selected short stories.** Journal of Ecohumanism, 3(4), 2066–2072.

Whitehead, C. (2019). **The Nickel Boys.** Doubleday.

(2007). **Democracy in Arab State Between Theory and Reality.** Kirkuk

University Journal: Humanity Studies, 2(2), 128-147.

https://kujhs.uokirkuk.edu.iq/article_43417.html

Rostam, S. U., & Almaarof, A. R. (2024). **The relation of memory, imagination, and the individual according to attachment theory: A study of selected short stories.** Journal of Ecohumanism, 3(4), 2066–2072.

Schlosser, E. (2021). **Writing against walls: Prison literature and the archive of pain.** Comparative Literature Review, 45(3), 225–241.