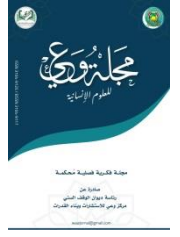




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War Trauma and Narrative Voice in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction

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Abstract

The current research addresses the problem of traumatic events and the ways of their depiction in contemporary literary works related to war. This research focuses on Sinan Antoon's novel, I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody, Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds, and Kristin Hannah's The Nightingale, analyzing the use of a non-linear plot in depicting trauma and employing such narrative techniques as flashback and fragmented memory structure. This research will be conducted using qualitative content analysis, drawing on trauma and narrative theories to explore how trauma impacts the literary work's form and content.

It can be concluded that the presence of trauma is consistently depicted by means of chronology disruption, fragmented narration, and unstable memory structure. In Antoon's work, the concept of trauma is presented by means of political repression, imprisonment, and linguistic fragmentation within a totalitarian regime. In Powers' work, trauma is manifested by means of war experiences, survivor's guilt, and intrusive memory in a fragmented narrative. In Hannah's work, trauma is presented through the technique of retrospective narration and flashbacks.

Between all the three selected novels, trauma cannot be only seen as a thematic concern but also a formal narrative principle that disrupts the linear and traditional storytelling. This study found that the contemporary fiction, particularly the Iraqi, uses a nonlinear narration and flashback techniques as central strategies to represent the complexity of the traumatic experience and its seemingly everlasting psychological effects.

1. Introduction

The political history of modern Iraq can be described as a continuous cycle of crisis that has made the country one of the most politically and socially unstable in the contemporary Middle Eastern region. Ever since the creation of the Iraqi state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1921, Iraq has gone through waves of political instability and turmoil that have affected the very essence of its identity and collective memory. This political instability, coupled with republicanism, Baathism, foreign intervention, international sanctions, occupation, and sectarianism, has created a national condition of trauma that Iraqis have had to live through ever since the establishment of the Iraqi statehood (Milich, Pannewick, & Tramontini, 2010). In particular, Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, bringing with him one of the bloodiest eras in the political history of Iraq. Repression, spying, censorship, militarization, and wars became characteristic of Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule, especially in regard to the Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, sanctions regime, 2003 US-led invasion, and rise of sectarian extremism and terrorism embodied by ISIS (Milich et al., 2010).

The successive tragedies and wars have left profound psychological and social impacts on Iraqi society. Iraqis' trauma is not only about individual psychological pain experienced during combat; rather, it is about prolonged suffering caused by ongoing violence, oppression, displacement, terror, and political instability. In line with Herman's (2015) definition of prolonged trauma, which entails traumatic exposure on a prolonged basis under captivity, oppression, and powerlessness, Iraqi trauma reflects the ongoing trauma experienced by the Iraqi people. Moreover, Iraqi trauma goes beyond individual psychological damage and is best described as a culture-wide phenomenon, which has disintegrated the social fabric and the collective identity of the Iraqi community. According to Erikson, collective trauma is "a blow to the basic tissues that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (as cited in Milich et al., 2010, p. XII). Under

such traumatic socio-political circumstances, the literary discourse becomes one of the most important means of recording the suffering of the Iraqi people.

According to Milich et al., literature is more than just art; rather, it is a powerful cultural practice whereby societies construct memory, suffer, and remake their stories of identity. In Iraq, literature has become a particularly important means of recording suffering, resisting oblivion, and contesting political myths. The contemporary Iraqi writer has turned increasingly to the literary genre of fiction to describe past acts of violence, social breakdown, political repression, and mental anguish, producing stories that are at once testimonial, elegiac, and subversive.

Nevertheless, literature can be a difficult aesthetic and narrative form within which to capture trauma. Trauma is inherently resistant to representation because, as Caruth notes, it does not occur at the time of the experience but rather reemerges later in a disjointed fashion through memories, flashbacks, nightmares, and repetition. This means that trauma narratives often break the rules of conventional storytelling and adopt instead a fragmented and nonlinear narrative structure that mirrors the psyche of the victimized person.

This phenomenon has gained particular prominence in modern Iraqi fiction, where narrative discontinuity, flashbacks, dreams, broken thoughts, changing time frames, and unpredictable first-person narrative predominate in stories set amid war and repression (Firmani, 2018; O’Gorman, 2015).

Thus, it is evident that the narrative voice plays a crucial part in the representation of Iraqi trauma in literature, as it serves not only as a literary technique but also as an aesthetic means for the manifestation and mediation of trauma. Iraqi writers tend to employ broken narrative voices, unreliable narration, and chronological disorder in order to reflect the psychological fragmentation resulting from long-term trauma. For example, in Sinan Antoon’s novel *I’jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, trauma is depicted through broken first-person recollections, fragmented memory, nightmares, and non-linear narration in a way that mirrors the mental breakdown and paranoia of a trauma survivor in

a totalitarian environment (Habeeb, 2015). Antoon himself views non-linear narrative as “a political and philosophical choice” that challenges oppressive discourse while capturing the fragmented nature of the traumatized individual’s thoughts (as cited in Habeeb, 2015).

1.1 Research Problem

Although there has been an increased scholarly focus on war literature in Iraq, most of the critical work done so far seems to be more concerned with the background of trauma in terms of historical and political contexts than with how such trauma is discursively constructed within the literary work itself. Even though there exist various studies that analyze the aspects of trauma, oppression, war, and postcolonialism within Iraqi fiction (Habeeb, 2015; Hamedawi, 2017; Masmoudi, 2015), little attention seems to have been paid so far to the question of the interrelationship between war trauma and narrative voice. In other words, many analyses of trauma in Iraqi fiction seem to be based on either psychoanalytic approaches or historical contexts while not paying sufficient attention to how narration itself acquires traumatic characteristics.

Therefore, the research problem explored in this study relates to the fact that, despite the fact that there is a large body of critical scholarship devoted to trauma fiction written in Iraq, very few analyses explore how narrative voice functions as one of the strategies used for encoding traumatic experiences within literary works.

1.2 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the current research will help fill this gap through investigating the interconnection between war trauma and narrative voice in a selection of Iraqi novels written in recent times. The importance of the current study is evident from its potential contribution to Iraqi literary criticism and trauma studies. Firstly, the current study adds to the body of knowledge about Iraqi literature as it emphasizes the significance of narrative voice as a key aspect of the analysis of Iraqi trauma fiction. Secondly, the current research

contributes to the field of trauma studies in the way that it illustrates the need for contextualizing Iraqi trauma within the specific sociopolitical and historical conditions of Iraq instead of uncritically applying Western trauma theory. According to Habeeb (2015), Iraqi trauma cannot be examined using the existing trauma theories as it does not involve isolated traumas but rather involves long-lasting, repetitive violence that pervades society at large. Lastly, the current study emphasizes the cultural importance of literature in preserving memory and resisting forgetting. By focusing on how narrative voice and disruption can be considered traumatic elements in Iraqi fiction, this research will ultimately try to prove that the fragmented structure of the narratives contained in modern Iraqi novels is not just a stylistic approach but a significant reflection on trauma experienced by writers and their nations because of war, oppression, and fragmentation.

2. Literature Review

An increasing amount of literary criticism has been written about war literature and trauma with regard to the connections between violence in historical experience and its literary reflection. In cases when there are a number of literary works created in societies suffering from war and sociopolitical instability for a long time, one cannot but pay attention to how war and trauma influence the content and structure of literary works created in such societies. It should be noted that war literature appeared quite a long ago and goes back to oral epic traditions or even classical epic poets like Homer and Virgil, while officially being established as a distinct type of literature only in the early 20th century (Cuddon, 1998; Zeacharias, 2018).

From the perspective of Zeacharias (2018), war fiction has gone through a substantial transformation, which is reflected not only in terms of theme but also in terms of technique. Indeed, modern and postmodern war fiction has stopped idealizing the process of war itself; instead, it focuses on the psychological dimension of war experience and represents such features of war experience as

violence, pain, and trauma in a complex way. The peculiarities of representation are usually reflected in narrative technique since, according to Zeacharias (2018), modern and postmodern war fiction is often marked by non-standard approaches to narration including the use of non-linear time structure, stream of consciousness, interior monologue, flashbacks, and other innovative narrative techniques. All these narrative techniques can be regarded as particularly efficient since they formally resemble the process of experiencing psychological trauma. Thus, non-linear narration has become one of the main features of modern war fiction, especially that aimed at reflecting psychological trauma.

In her influential book on trauma theory, Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming event that exceeds the limits of both human comprehension and language itself” (Caruth, 1995). Due to the fact that the nature of trauma is such that it interferes with the cognitive processes of the individual, memory connected to trauma can be described as being non-linear and disjointed. Trauma narratives, as a result, tend not to narrate their stories linearly but rather through disruptions in form and structure as a reflection of the mind state of the narrator who is traumatized. As such, trauma fiction tends to utilize unconventional narrative strategies that emulate trauma’s disruptive power on consciousness.

Trauma literature, although diverse in terms of subject matter, is still relatively underexplored regarding war fiction from Iraq. According to Habeeb (2015), despite the abundant body of Iraqi trauma fiction, there have been far fewer academic analyses devoted to literary representations of trauma in the Arabic fictional world of Iraq compared to trauma literature in Western cultures. Notably, there is no extensive research done on trauma writings in the Arab world when compared to Western literature and especially those related to the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam War. In fact, this discrepancy can be considered remarkable due to the long-lasting nature of the Iraqi experience of war and socio-political unrest that has characterized decades of the country’s turbulent history.

One of the first theoretical analyses of the evolution of war literature in Iraq was conducted by Al-Taleb (1983), who attempted to identify the roots and development of the genre as well as its social impacts on the society and literature. Indeed, this work provides an important insight into the early history of war literature in the country starting from the Second World War till the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War.

Later studies included a discussion of the themes found in Iraq war fiction, including issues related to repression, death, suffering, and political violence. For instance, according to Masmoudi (2015), Iraqi war fiction has come to reflect the sovereign violence associated with the Iraqi state, highlighting the fact that in Iraq, the individual has to survive in conditions characterized by death, violence, and sovereign power. Specifically, Masmoudi asserts that in Iraqi war narratives, people face the constant struggle of trying to survive under circumstances characterized by anarchy and lawlessness, which makes them "doomed to a living death" (Masmoudi, 2015, p. 25).

Similarly, in his study of Iraq war literature, Firmani (2018) finds that it includes elements of horror that involve the depiction of the death and destruction of the human body. To portray such traumatic experiences, Iraq writers use gothic, absurdist, surrealist, and fragmented approaches. It is the chaotic nature of the society of wartime Iraq that is portrayed through the use of such stylistic devices, according to Firmani. O'Gorman (2015) argues that war stories centered around Iraq employ fragmented textuality, disturbed realities, collapsing settings, and multidirectional memory frameworks, leading to stories which defy singular meanings or traditional understandings.

In fact, a number of authors have investigated representations of trauma in Iraqi literature; however, the vast majority of these studies examine issues from a thematic perspective. Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon, Habeeb's (2015) seminal work, examines trauma in literary works within Iraqi context. In particular, Habeeb considers Sinan Antoon's novels, such as *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*

and The Corpse Washer, highlighting the way they represent war and oppression in Iraq. Habeeb argues that Iraq trauma cannot be understood only in terms of the West's psychoanalytic understanding of the issue. Rather, Iraqi trauma needs to be contextualized in terms of oppression, war, violence, and social disintegration.

Such an assertion is supported by the work of Hamedawi (2017), who explores Iraqi fiction through a postcolonial lens. According to Hamedawi, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the emergence of ISIS have significantly influenced the development of Iraqi literature insofar as they introduced increased focus on issues of violence, oppression, corruption, trauma, and fragmented identities. Hamedawi believes that postcolonial literature from Iraq has evolved into an innovative artistic form characterized by realism, surrealism, imagination, and speculation to reflect the complex nature of the traumas experienced by the people of Iraq at the hands of their own oppressive rulers and invading foreigners.

Other researchers have analyzed the impact of trauma on human psychology in war tales via distorted memory and non-chronological narration. In this regard, Wright (2019) claims that memory in the context of postmodernist war literature is always disarranged, illogical, and fragmentary since trauma-related memories cannot be recovered through any chronologically-based memory recollection. Moreover, according to Sagar and Shehadah (2020), stories about trauma tend to feature the described events in unsymmetrical and illogical manner due to the fact that the traumatized psyche is unable to organize its memory in an orderly fashion. In addition, this connection between trauma and non-chronological narration can be supported by Ihunwo (2021), who states that the flashback and analepsis techniques used in trauma novels allow for disturbing chronology in a way reminiscent of how trauma triggers the recollection of the traumatic memories.

Nevertheless, while much research has been conducted recently regarding the impact of trauma on the human psyche in literature, the majority of papers

dedicated to Iraqi war novels still concentrate on trauma's causes and political implications. There has been much discussion regarding war, dictatorship, occupation, and political oppression as causes of trauma; however, there has been very little investigation into the ways in which narrative voice and narrative form contribute to trauma consciousness in the text itself.

This issue is particularly important when discussing novels like *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* by Sinan Antoon, where not only trauma themes but also trauma form are used. For instance, according to Habeeb (2015), the fragmented structure and nonlinearity of *I'jaam* reflect the psychological disintegration of the novel's protagonist, who experiences trauma. Still, there are few scholarly works that have furthered this idea and discussed the contribution of narrative voice to trauma representation in Iraqi fiction in a broader manner.

Thus, whereas previous works have made valuable contributions to the field by proving Iraqi literature an important source to analyze issues such as war, oppression, trauma, and memory, it is also evident that there is a notable absence of studies on the relationship between trauma and narrative voice. Not enough attention has been paid to the issue of how Iraqi authors utilize such narrative techniques as first person narrative voice, fragmentation, flashbacks, chronological disruption, and others to not only narrate stories of trauma but to embody it through narratives.

The purpose of the research is to fill this particular void in scholarly knowledge by analyzing the way in which the concept of narrative voice functions as a literary technique used to convey the experience of war trauma in contemporary Iraqi literature.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Trauma Theory and the Concept of Prolonged Suffering

The current research incorporates an interdisciplinary theoretical approach based mainly on trauma theory that will help to analyze war trauma

and narrative voice in Iraqi fiction. The notion of trauma as understood by Cathy Caruth in her work (1995) implies an experience of being faced with something that initially defies understanding and comes back later as an intrusion of memories, dreams, and flashbacks. The researcher's definition of trauma states that it does not happen immediately after a violent act but is the outcome of a psychological response to an overwhelming experience when one could not handle all of the information received during the incident at once.

This interpretation of trauma appears especially appropriate for studying Iraqi fiction since this concept is typically portrayed via a distorted temporality, fragmented narrative, and constant imagery of violence and death. In addition, as pointed out by Whitehead (2004), trauma is never available at the very moment of happening but becomes so due to repetition and narrative disjunction, which are commonly expressed in literature through nonlinearity and distorted memories.

Nevertheless, in the Iraqi context, trauma goes beyond an individual psychological state and should be considered as a prolonged experience historically. The theory of "prolonged trauma," proposed by Judith Herman (2015), fits this context best as it refers to a kind of trauma that comes from living for years in the conditions of violence, captivity, oppression, and instability. The history of Iraq since its establishment until now, including different wars, dictatorship, economic sanctions, invasion, and sectarian conflicts, is a permanent traumatizing experience for people living there (Mousa, 2018; Milich, Pannewick, & Tramontini, 2013).

Trauma, in this case, does not mean a unique temporal gap experienced once and never to be repeated, but the experience that influences lives of people and society all the time. Iraqi novels show this experience of trauma by creating characters who are always exposed to fear and insecurity.

3.2 Collective Trauma, Social Violence, and Insidious Suffering

Apart from theories concerning individual trauma, this study also relies on the notion of collective trauma elaborated by Kai Erikson (1991). In this regard, Erikson claims that trauma not only implies personal psychological damage but also involves disruptions to social connections, shared meanings, and communal identities. Thus, trauma impacts entire societies because it disorients their ability to establish trust and connection among individuals.

Such a point is especially important for analysis of Iraqi war fiction since, in this particular case, trauma appears to be perceived by many writers not only on the level of individual psychology but also on the national scale.

In addition to that, while focusing on Iraq and war fiction about the region, it should be said that the research will also use the notion of "insidious trauma" introduced by Root (1996). This type of trauma is characterized by its gradual development that is associated with prolonged devaluing and discrimination of particular identities or social groups within society.

Unlike other types of trauma, which usually have one triggering factor, insidious trauma develops over time due to constant oppression of specific social or identity groups. According to several literary critics, post-2003 literature in Iraq has increasingly featured ethnic and religious division as well as marginalized identities within its narratives (Hanoosh, 2013; Ghareeb, 2018). The use of these elements shows how post-2003 Iraqi novels have evolved to consider both visible acts of violence and slow but painful processes of psychological degeneration due to political unrest and oppression in their concept of trauma.

3.3 Narrative Voice, Fragmentation, and Cultural Memory

The last area of narrative theory is relevant for the present study through its analysis of trauma in fiction. Traumatic literature has shown that the experience of trauma interrupts conventional storytelling, thus creating a fragmented, nonlinear, and repetitive narrative style. According to Zeacharias (2018), war fiction often involves various strategies like flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness writing.

The use of narrative discontinuities is not only a form of literary device used by Iraqi authors but is inherently tied to traumatic consciousness. In the context of Iraqi literature, the non-linear nature of story-telling often reflects the psychological condition of the protagonist, which is formed due to violent, oppressive events in the past.

In addition to the above theoretical paradigms, the study is grounded in narratological concepts of instability of narrative voice in trauma fiction. The most common techniques applied in trauma fiction include first-person narration, interior monologue, and testimony discourse, which serve as literary devices conveying the immediacy of traumatic experience along with its fragmentation. As Herman (2015) puts it, trauma victims tend to find it difficult to build coherent stories of their traumatic experiences, a problem that is translated into literary works via fragmentary self-expression and unreliable narration.

Finally, in this research, I employ cultural memory theory developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann and cited in Ghareeb (2018). According to cultural memory theory, literature plays an important part in the formation of collective remembrance, serving as a form of social remembering of certain historical event(s). It is, therefore, clear that literature operates as an alternate archive of trauma by archiving the kind of experiences that do not make it into history due to their marginalized status.

In Ghareeb's view (2018), Iraqi fiction plays a major role in restoring cultural memory through the transformation of traumatic experience into narration. This means that through its ability to narrate stories, literature acts as both evidence and critique of the experiences of a community.

4. Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Research Approach and Design

The present study uses a qualitative research design. This is because the study focuses on analyzing aspects of meaning-making and narrative voice in selected pieces of Iraqi fiction in light of war trauma. Therefore, since the study is about interpretation, a qualitative research design is suitable for the study. The present study can be regarded as a descriptive-analytical work as well. Its descriptiveness implies that the study starts with describing the narrative devices and themes of the selected literary texts and further proceeds to analysis of meaning constructions in relation to trauma, memory, identity, and historical experience formation.

4.2 Corpus of the Study

The main source material for the present research will be the selected Iraqi novels which depict the war, violence, and trauma experiences of their narrators. Following the provided extracts and the aim of the study, the following texts are to be discussed in detail:

- Sinan Antoon, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*
- Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*
- Zauhair Jabouri, *The Corpse Hunter*
- References to other Iraq war novels written since 2003

The chosen books will be analyzed due to the fact that they reveal different aspects of Iraqi trauma and violence experiences, especially, in connection with oppression, life after invasion, and psychological consequences of being in the state of constant war. Post-2003 fiction is considered to be primarily devoted to the problems of trauma, migration, identity destruction, and marginal ethno-religious groups (Hanoosh, 2013; Ghareeb, 2018; Khudayir, 2017).

It should be noted that chosen novels have similar narrative techniques such as fragmentation, nonlinearity, and first person point of view which makes them ideal candidates for literary analysis of trauma in fiction.

4.3 Analytical Framework and Procedures

The methodology adopted in the current study implies application of interdisciplinary trauma research, combining narratology, trauma theory, and cultural memory studies. Thus, the following three major analytical approaches are applied:

1. Trauma Representation

In this aspect, the study explores thematic and psychological representation of trauma in the novels under analysis by considering such elements as:

- depiction of violence and oppression in war
- manifestations of trauma such as flashbacks, nightmares, memory gaps, etc.
- experiences of fear, alienation, identity crisis
- collective or prolonged suffering.

For the analysis, Caruth's (1995) concept of trauma, Herman's (2015) idea of prolonged trauma, as well as Erikson's (1991) understanding of collective trauma will be used.

2. Narrative Voice and Structure

Secondly, the way how trauma manifests in terms of narrative technique and voice will be considered paying specific attention to:

- first person point of view and testimonial narrative
- fragments of narration, unreliable narrator
- nonlinear time sequence (e.g., flashbacks, interruptions, repetitions).
- Stream of consciousness.

These characteristics are analyzed as representations of traumatic experience based on the narratological analysis of war fiction (Zecharias, 2018; Whitehead, 2004). Narrative disruption is seen as an expression of psychological disruption, which is assumed as part of the study.

3. Cultural Memory and Historical Representation

Thirdly, the analysis focuses on the ways Iraqi fiction serves as the cultural memory. This includes:

- the ways novels represent historical events such as wars, dictatorial regimes, and occupations
- the ways of narration and distortion of memories
- ways of preserving of silenced or marginalized memories
- ways of reconstructing national identity through trauma narratives

This aspect of the analysis is based on the concept of cultural memory (Assmann), as well as other works stressing the importance of literature for representing collective memory and identity after the year 2003 (Ghareeb, 2018; Al-Musawi, 2020; Ali, 2019).

4.4 Research Procedure

The proposed methodology involves a systematic close reading approach comprising the following steps:

Selection of Texts and Acquaintance with Them: Novels under analysis are carefully read in order to identify appropriate passages on the topics of trauma, war experience, and narrative disruption.

Themes and Narrative Patterns Identification: Key themes such as violence, memory loss, displacement, and identity crisis are identified and categorized.

Textual Analysis and Interpretation: A selected number of passages from the texts are interpreted using close reading techniques that focus on the language used, structures within the texts, symbols employed by the authors, as well as narrative voices used.

Theory Implementation: Trauma, narratology, and cultural memory theory is used to explore how meaning is created within the texts.

Comparative Texts Analysis: When appropriate, similarities and differences between the selected texts will be identified in order to establish any common themes within contemporary Iraqi war literature.

5. Analysis of the Texts

This section will analyze the selected novels using trauma and narrative theory, focusing on the use of nonlinear narration, flashbacks, and fragmented trauma narratives to depict psychological and political violence. This analysis starts with Sinan Antoon's *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* since it provides a basis for trauma narration amid political repression and captivity.

5.1 I'jaam: Political Repression and Fragmented Trauma Narrative

I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody by Sinan Antoon is a novelized memoir of Furat, an Iraqi student and poet living under the Ba'ath Party regime amidst the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The controlled political environment in the novel manifests itself right at the beginning where language itself becomes subject to surveillance and censorship through its use as a tool of punishment as Furat's arrest for satirical and critical writings shows. Linguistic ambiguity and manipulation is one of the main themes in the novel and it manifests itself through Furat's practice of eliminating Arabic diacritical marks which allows him to create intentionally ambiguous expressions. The novel itself provides an explanation stating that there are many possible meanings when reading letters in Arabic without dots. Thus, the novel deliberately plays with meaning, making it unstable and up for dispute. In other words, this is precisely what makes the

representation of trauma in the novel work since trauma does just the same – it destabilizes representation.

The story begins with an instruction from the Ministry of Interior about an unclassified manuscript from the prison. Right from the start, the text becomes an archival reconstruction of a fragmented voice in the state context. Later, the manuscript is described as containing “unrelated thoughts and illogical recollections” (I'jaam, p. 97). Thus, the trauma is defined structurally through its link to disorganization, discontinuation, and fragmentation.

Among the features of I'jaam, it is necessary to distinguish the nonlinearity and discontinuation of the narration because they are directly linked to the state of mind of the narrator. The author jumps randomly between the periods of time spent in prison, childhood memories, personal relationships, and fantasy/dreamlike visions. According to academic sources, war narratives frequently use fragmentation to avoid linearity and reflect psychological damage (Zecharias, 2018, p. 368). Moreover, the flashbacks or analeptic narrative techniques are very common for modern literature to express trauma and memory (Cuddon, 1998, p. 321; Ihunwo, 2021, p. 237).

However, in I'jaam, flashbacks can be indistinguishably interchanged with hallucinations and nightmares. As a result, it is impossible for the reader to perceive the flow of time correctly; hence, the narrative effect of uncontrollable memories intruding upon the stream of consciousness takes place according to trauma theory. The phrase "I awoke to find myself (t)here" may serve as a structural element of such instability as the reader cannot determine whether it is "here" (a prison at the present moment) or "there" (past memories/imagined places).

Thus, the story begins with the protagonist's arrest followed by an interrogation session. The Ba'athist regime described in the book can be characterized by its totalization which is manifested through pervasive surveillance of all spheres of life, namely education, family relationships, etc. The existence of spies on the campus of schools and universities makes it

impossible for people to trust others, which corresponds to the idea of prolonged trauma as formulated by Judith Herman.

Through this lens, one can view Furat's life story as a series of trauma characterized by feelings of fear, uncertainty, and lack of control. His grandmother's warnings and fear of being detained are examples of the state of hyperarousal, where one is constantly in a state of anticipating danger. Before any physical detention, Furat finds himself in psychological confinement. Once in prison, trauma becomes both physical and literary.

From here, one can begin to see trauma both literally and figuratively. Trauma becomes literal in that the protagonist suffers physically. On the other hand, the literary structure of the book becomes a symbol of trauma, which Caruth describes as "inconsistencies in relation to causality." This becomes evident from the way that events unfold in this book since they are not narrated chronologically.

Also worth noting is the fact that the book focuses on state violence not only as a form of repression but also as a way of ideological conditioning. Indeed, Ba'ath Party members call on citizens to not only show loyalty to the regime but also to have some sort of psychological affinity with it. It could be argued that there is a form of symbolic domination taking place in the novel because the state needs more than obedience – it requires internalization of the political process.

Moreover, the book brings into focus the concept of fear as a means of social regulation. For instance, people are told to regard everybody as an informant, even those who belong to one's own family. Thus, it could be stated that a form of social fragmentation takes place in the book. In other words, trust between individuals disappears.

One of the most important elements in *I'jaam* is the use of writing as a form of resistance and survival. Furat continues his literary pursuits despite the lack of clarity and danger, making writing a fragile expression of agency in the

context of the novel. However, the fragility of the practice of writing is emphasized even further in *I'jaam*, since writing becomes another practice that can be monitored and misunderstood by those in power.

The end of the novel adds to the confusion. While the narrator suggests that the story has been abruptly terminated due to some revolutionary changes taking place in the country, it is hard to determine whether such transformations have occurred or whether they are only illusions generated by Furat in an attempt to break free from the constraints that had been put on him for so long.

Thus, one may conclude that, through the use of fragmented memories, non-linear narration, ambiguity, and unstable linguistic practices, *I'jaam* captures the nature of trauma and the way in which it is embedded in people's minds. While doing this, it aligns with the broader trends in the contemporary Iraqi fiction, in which the narrative fragmentation has become a key aesthetic strategy to represent the historical trauma and the authoritarian violence.

5.2 The Yellow Birds: War Trauma, Memory, and Nonlinear Recall

Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* provides an alternative but thematically compatible example of how trauma can be represented in literature. Where Antoon's narrative discusses political imprisonment and torture at the hands of a regime, Powers offers the story of the psychological dissolution of soldiers during and after their participation in combat operations within the framework of the Iraq War (2003). Nonetheless, the same emphasis on nonlinear storytelling, discontinuous memories, and a structure of flashbacks is evident, which helps to portray trauma as a constant mental process rather than a single historic event.

Throughout the novel, John Bartle – the narrator – tries to piece together the events of the past. In particular, he is preoccupied with remembering his participation in the war and the death of his companion, Murph. However, his efforts prove fruitless, as his story remains incoherent and disjointed. More precisely, the narrative constantly oscillates between past and present events

without any clear temporal demarcation. The structure and style of this narrative coincide with the characteristics of war literature described by Zeacharias, which emphasizes the use of nonlinear narratives to portray the impact of violence and participation in combat (Zeacharias, 2018, p. 368).

One of the key elements in *The Yellow Birds* is the use of flashbacks as a narrative technique. In the book, flashbacks are not depicted as controlled memory but as uncontrollable memory. As stated by Ihunwo (2021, p. 237), flashback is used as a means of breaking up chronology in order to restore meaning, build characters, or create intensity. However, unlike in other novels, flashbacks in Powers' book do not give rise to meaning but to intensity of instability.

Flashbacks create an overlapping between the past and present in terms of themes such as guilt, loss, and survival. Flashbacks of Murph in Bartle are the traumatic core that structures the whole narrative. These repetitions of memories show the phenomenon of intrusive memory, which is characteristic of trauma theory. Intrusive memory is the inability to process a traumatic event as past and to continue experiencing it through fragments of memory.

Whereas trauma in I'jaam is associated with political monitoring and captivity, trauma in *The Yellow Birds* comes from the realities of combat and military life. Not only does combat cause physical trauma to the soldiers, but also psychological trauma due to their lack of emotional and cognitive processing of deaths and their accountability for those deaths. Therefore, in this case, trauma is a complex experience of guilt and survival.

The novel also shows how memory loses its reliability and becomes reconstructive in nature. This is evident in Bartle's narratives as he revisits previous memories and changes his interpretation of those moments. Such an approach to memory is typical of postmodern literature, which sees memory as a fluid process, not just a simple storage of information (Wright, 2019). Thus, the concept of trauma affects not only the timeline of events but also our understanding of the true nature of those events.

In addition, the novel by Powers is representative of the emerging post-2003 theme in Iraqi and war literature, when stories start moving away from linearity in terms of reality and become more fragmented and symbolic in their representation of violence. In this respect, according to Ghareeb (2018) and Al-Musawi (2020), within the general scope of post-2003 Iraqi literature, trauma becomes an important component of the story-telling structure and organization. Even though *The Yellow Birds* is created from the perspective of U.S., it shares its place in global literature as one more example of how war trauma disrupts memory.

Moreover, the novel pays attention to long-lasting psychological effects of war and not only on the battlefields but also among civilians. Unstable memories experienced by Bartle are an outcome of ongoing trauma and not just an initial reaction to some kind of danger. In such a way, the novel is connected with modern trauma theory that defines post-traumatic stress as a delayed response.

Concerning narrative techniques, one can notice that *The Yellow Birds* is characterized by the use of temporal fragmentation, fragmented monologue, and retrospective narration, which help to create a sense of disruption. The lack of the linear plot serves as the reflection of the fact that the protagonist is unable to integrate his war experience into a coherent life story.

Overall, one might say that in the context of war literature, *The Yellow Birds* shows how nonlinear narration and the flashback technique do not just describe certain events but reflect their psychological essence.

5.3 The Nightingale: Historical Trauma, Memory, and Feminized War Experience

Although *The Nightingale* written by Kristin Hannah describes events related to WWII, it shares several similarities with other literary works dedicated to contemporary or more recent wars.

Throughout the novel, the focus is on the experiences of two sisters, Vianne and Isabelle, in occupied France during World War II. While the historical setting of the novel differs from I'jaam and *The Yellow Birds*, the story in this book is also structured using memory and retrospective thinking, which helps the authors convey the idea of traumatic experiences in times of war. The book employs a non-linear storyline in the form of a flashback in order to describe war-related traumatic events. Such approach is consistent with the concept of the literary flashback defined by Cuddon (1998) and Ihunwo (2021) as a technique of narrative deviation aimed at reconstructing the past.

In other words, a flashback is a way in which an author interrupts the current story with an earlier event that contributes to the development of a larger picture in the modern literary works. In contrast to the fragmented flashbacks of *The Yellow Birds*, Hannah's novel employs flashback in order to recount past events in detail. The recollection process is also facilitated by subsequent reflections on these events. However, the intensity with which memories are colored by emotion indicates the destabilizing nature of war.

The Nightingale focuses particularly on gendered perspectives on trauma and the way that women go through war in unique ways according to their roles, from occupation and submission to acts of resistance, loss, and survival. The two stories that are told through Vianne and Isabelle demonstrate the way that trauma can be a personal matter based on one's place within society and on their gender and agency. In other words, the story broadens the definition of trauma to include the violence in domestic life rather than being limited to combat.

In terms of narrative technique, *The Nightingale* employs heavy use of retrospective focalization. That means that the story unfolds through memories that are colored by the experience of living through it. In contrast with I'jaam that is fragmented into extreme pieces of memory, the novel in question maintains a chronological structure of the narration that is consistently disrupted by emotional flashbacks.

The book also fits into the wider conversation about the portrayal of trauma in contemporary literature, specifically the concept that literature serves as a platform for creating cultural memory. According to Ghareeb (2018) and Al-Musawi (2020), in the case of post-2003 Iraqi novels, literature acts as a repository of collective memory and the interpretation of the violence that occurred during that period. Although *The Nightingale* takes place in a different setting than those discussed by Ghareeb and Al-Musawi, it nonetheless creates memories of war as a cultural narrative passed down orally.

Moreover, trauma in *The Nightingale* is associated with ethical decision-making under highly adverse circumstances. The characters are confronted with numerous moral decisions involving survival, betrayal, sacrifice, and resistance. The flashbacks reveal how such decisions haunt the characters psychologically long after the war years have come to an end. In other words, trauma in this instance is associated with both violence endured and actions committed under duress and fear.

Flashbacks also play a part in building up the sense of continuity and emotional authenticity in *The Nightingale*. In contrast to the fragmentary approach to describing wartime experience in modernist fiction, Hannah attempts to recover an authentic emotional history from a past marked by violence and death. Yet, as noted earlier, it is precisely through a process of memory selection and interpretation that this continuity is achieved.

To sum up, *The Nightingale* reveals that trauma can be written about using retrospection, narrative flashbacks, and emotional memory recovery. Even though the story does not have as much structural fragmentation as the stories in either *I'jaam* or *The Yellow Birds*, it too employs the disruption of time to show the lasting effects of wartime experiences on individual consciousness.

6. Findings and Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the theme of trauma and how it is depicted in various works of contemporary and war-related literature including Sinan

Antoon's novel "I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody", Kevin Powers' "The Yellow Birds" and Kristin Hannah's "The Nightingale". Throughout this analysis, it becomes apparent that trauma is not only an essential theme explored in the novels; it is also integral to the narrative construction.

Perhaps, one of the major themes which is common for all three novels is the use of non-linear narration and flashbacks as an effective technique for depicting trauma. In "I'jaam", the degree of fragmentation reaches its apex. Chronological distortion, narrative instability and ambiguous language are all used by the author as means for describing the psychological consequences of political imprisonment and surveillance. In this case, switching from dreams, memories and reality serves as an illustration of trauma blurring the border between perception and real life.

In the same vein, the use of memory fragments and flashback narration is employed in *The Yellow Birds* to reflect the psychological impact of war on the mind of the characters. Unlike *I'jaam*, which involves a form of political captivity that causes the narrator to experience trauma, the trauma portrayed in Powers' novel results from the experience of war itself, moral injury, and feelings of survivor's guilt. The difficulty for the narrator to separate past from present emphasizes the disruptive nature of traumatic memory.

On the other hand, in *The Nightingale*, flashbacks take on the form of structured narratives and serve as a mechanism for the narrator to deal with trauma. In other words, memories of wartime experience have been arranged in such a way that forms a coherent story of survival, resistance, and moral choices. While being more structured than the above-mentioned texts, *The Nightingale* also indicates that wartime experience can be remembered only selectively and emotionally.

The analysis of the three novels shows some dissimilarities in the historical background of the traumas explored by the authors and at the same time reveals similarities in the narrative responses to them. In terms of trauma under the conditions of dictatorship and surveillance, the novel *I'jaam* is a good

example; in relation to the military conditions and the psychological consequences of the war, the work *The Yellow Birds* is a perfect example; as for trauma during historical wartime occupation and resistance, *The Nightingale* is an illustrative piece.

From the theoretical viewpoint, the obtained results coincide with trauma studies in that traumatic experience cannot be described directly and is instead revealed through repetition, fragmentation, and disruption in narratives. It turns out that in terms of the novels discussed above, the narrative technique used in them reveals that the essence of trauma consists not only in its narration but also in the way it is conveyed.

In addition, the analysis shows the significance of memory as a psychological phenomenon as well as a cultural one. In all three novels, memory is not a stable representation of the past events. Instead, it becomes a reconstruction, a narration influenced by fear, guilt, or reflection. Thus, this analysis is consistent with broader scholarship on Iraq and war literature, especially studies of literary construction of cultural memory and negotiation of violence in fiction (Ghareeb, 2018; Al-Musawi, 2020).

Another important conclusion from the analysis is that the traumatic narration serves as a form of resistance in all three novels. In *I'jaam*, writing becomes an act of defiance against oppression. In *The Yellow Birds*, narration attempts to cope with guilt and loss. Finally, in *The Nightingale*, narration allows preserving memory and paying homage to heroic resistance. Hence, in all three novels, narrating becomes a tool of resistance and recovering lost voices.

Finally, the paper highlights the growing tendency among current war and trauma fiction authors to incorporate non-linear techniques within their narrative style. The use of such techniques among Iraqi and other war fiction writers worldwide is symptomatic of a more profound epistemological crisis, that of capturing violence in terms of narrative. Therefore, flashbacks, disjunctive narrative styles, and non-linearity are not merely literary devices but crucial instruments of conveying trauma.

To conclude, the above analysis reveals that trauma within the framework of contemporary fiction cannot be considered without paying attention to the narrative techniques used. In this connection, it may be concluded that novels analyzed in this paper demonstrate that war, dictatorship, and occupation not only create historical discontinuity but also give rise to literary discontinuity. Through the non-linear depiction of time and fragmented recollection, these novels provide us with some understanding of coping with the violence experienced, the loss encountered, and the psychology of survival.

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