

Dreaming Elsewhere: Shadows of Hope and Dreams of Departure in Kareem Sheghaidil's Cartoon Dreams

Asst. Prof. Marwa Sami Hussein

Zahraa Sattar Hafidh

English Department

College of Education for Humanities

Tikrit University

marwa.sami@tu.edu.iq

الحلم في مكان آخر: ظلال الأمل وأحلام الرحيل في مسرحية كريم شغيدل أحلام الكرتون

أ.م. مروة سامي حسين

زهراء ستار حافظ

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية جامعة تكريت

الخلاصة

يصور كريم شغيدل في مسرحية أحلام الكرتون الدمار النفسي والاجتماعي الذي خلفته الحرب في عراق ما بعد ٢٠٠٣. تركز هذه الدراسة الى نظرية الذاكرة الجمعية، حيث تصور الفضاءات الرمزية التي يستخدمها شغيدل لبيان الذاكرة، الخوف، وحتمية الفرار، مثل المطار والطائرة. كما تستند الدراسة على نظرية الصدمة المستندة الى اعمال ج. روجر كورتز، ج. هيرشبرغر، كاثي كاروث، وأوفى حسين محمد، لتوضح كيف تتفاعل شخصيات المسرحية - الجندي، المثقف، الراديكالي، والمطربة - مع الصدمة، الألم، والبقاء كل حسب منظوره الخاص. وتكشف الدراسة أيضا عن الدور الذي تؤديه أساليب التكيف مثل الأمل والسخرية في تمكين شخوص المسرحية من تحمل واقعها المرير. على الرغم من ان المسرحية لا تقدم حلا حاسما لمعضلة الصدمة، فانها تجيب عن أسئلة عميقة وجوهرية تتعلق بكيفية استمرار البشر في الحلم، المقاومة، والتمسك بالأمل حتى في ظل الظروف القاسية والجراح العميقة. الكلمات المفتاحية: أحلام الكرتون، السخرية، عراق ما بعد الحرب، كريم شغيدل، الصدمة

Abstract

In *Cartoon Dreams*, Kareem Sheghaidil depicts the emotional and social devastation wrought by war in post-2003 Iraq. The study, which is based on the theory of collective memory, examines the symbolic spaces used by Sheghaidil to depict memory, fear, and the need to flee, such as the airport and airplane. The study is based on trauma theory, primarily the works of J. Roger Kurtz, G. Hirschberger, Cathy Caruth and Awfa Hussein Mohammed, to demonstrate how the characters in the play, namely the Soldier, the Intellectual, the Radical and the Singer react to trauma, pain and survival in their own way. The article also explores how hope and irony serve as coping mechanisms that enable the characters to endure their harsh reality. While the play does not offer a clear solution to trauma, it answers certain questions about how people continue to dream, resist, and hold on to hope, even when they are deeply wounded.

Keywords: cartoon dreams, irony, post-war Iraq, Kareem Sheghaidil, trauma

Introduction: Iraq's Intellectual Landscape

Following the decline of the regime in 2003, Iraq confronted a critical time of changes. At the end of this age, Iraq began a long and hard journey to rebuild its political, social and economic systems. Years of unstable circumstances had left deep wounds on the country, creating divisions among its people and making the creation of a stable democracy unattainable. In addition to these hardships, the people of Iraq endured the common

experience of years of social, political and sectarian unrest, exacerbating tensions among Iraqis. Things were made more difficult by the US-led coalition's occupation of Iraq, which disrupted the government and military decisions that plunged Iraq into years of disturbance and confusion. By examining the impact of these events on Iraq, it is possible to gain insight into the current challenges and the potential for hope and change in the future (Mahdi, 2022, pp. a-b). Prior to 2003, Iraqi writers were subject to tight government control. The authorities closely monitored what could be written or published, making any form of criticism dangerous. Writers were forced to use metaphors to express their political criticism or simply to steer clear of sensitive issues. Such restrictions curtailed their freedom to express their opinions on political and social realities. The previous regime "have turned what was once one of the most vibrant presses in the Arab world into a mere propaganda tool" (Cazes, 2003, p. 1). This censorship was removed after 2003. With the fall of the regime, writers were able to write about their experiences and their country's reality. They began to openly discuss war, loss, identity and trauma. This change gave rise to a new type of literature, more personal, more direct and more forceful. The contrast between the pre-2003 and post-2003 works shows that more freedom has resulted in a more profound and honest artistic portrayal or expression of the past and present of Iraq.

Cartoon Dreams: An Overview

Cartoon Dreams is classified as political cabaret, a genre that uses light black comedy. The play features four characters: a female singer, a soldier, an intellectual, and a radical, all of whom have a dream of escaping the chaos of post-2003 Iraq (Alsharqiya Series, 2014). In the dream, they get on a plane, hoping to escape the violence and uncertainty that surrounds them. But things get weird when the plane is hijacked by some villains, and the characters begin to consider hijacking the plane:

Intellectual: Let's say we hijack the plane. Then what?

Radical: Divide the shares.

Intellectual: What do you mean? Like everyone takes a wing?

Radical: We'll sell it.

Soldier: *Yem awed*, are you serious? Where are we going to sell it? In the Thieves' Market? (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 163) In the end, it turns out that the entire situation is a dream, a means for the characters to escape the harsh realities they face. The playwright employs dark humor and irony to show the disillusionment of Iraqis dealing with the deep sense of loss and confusion after the fall of the previous regime. Sheghaidil depicts through absurdity how Iraqis attempted to deal with their broken sense of hope and the trauma in a ravaged country. Sheghaidil employs certain cultural elements as well as irony and absurdity to demonstrate the characters' strong ties to Iraq. The idiom [يمعّود] '*yem awad*' occurs several times in the play and has more than one meaning depending on the context, tone and voice, or is used in a casual and emotionally charged manner as is common in Iraqi speech. One direct use is from the Radical who states: "*Yem awad*, we've been working hard and making sacrifices to plan this" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 164). It has a tone of frustration, disbelief, and pleading in this context. This is a familiar rhythm to the dialogue and demonstrates the extent to which local language and emotion are embedded in the characters' conversations.

Music is also a means of cultural memory. The female singer sings the nostalgic folk song [الأفندي عيوني الأفندي] "*Lefendi, lefendi ... 'ayuni lefendi*" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 151). This light and playful moment evokes the past of Iraq which was full of warmth and passion. Then, however, the singer's voice changes: "The Singer *suddenly changes from a beautiful, traditional melody, to an upbeat, modern pop sound. The dancers throw down their sidayer.*" She then continues, "*Hella billillab jobi, ennob ennob ennob*" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 162), and introduces the famous [جوبي] '*jobi*' rhythm, which is a traditional group dance that is performed at weddings and gatherings. The characters are not only performing but summoning a shared memory. The play demonstrates the characters' carry of Iraq through idioms, songs and dance, language, movement and longing.

Literature Review

Kareem Sheghaidil's *Cartoon Dreams* depicts the challenges and hopes of Iraqi people living under hardship circumstances. The play is imaginative, with symbolism to emphasize the characters' fears and dreams. Sheghaidil's use of Grotesque is an unusual technique that scholars such as Sameer A. Monem Alkasimi and Wisal Khilfa Kadhum have pointed out as a way to criticize cultural and social rules, as well as to tackle sensitive issues such as displacements, identity, and resistance (Alkasimi & Al-Bakri, 2018, as cited in Hassani, 2022). Theatre has been a popular way for Iraqis to express and deal with the pain and suffering caused by war and dictatorship. Sheghaidil's role as a voice for people, whose stories are often ignored, was explored by Ahmed Mohamed Abdel Amir and Zainab Dawood Salman. They talk about how plays such as *Cartoon Dreams* communicate about the right topics in Iraqi theatre through gestures, word and action (Abdel Amir & Salman,

2018, as cited in Hassani, 2022). A major theme in *Cartoon Dreams* is the impact of the oppressive government and its impact on individuals and communities. Haider Taleb Hassani places the dramatic work in a wider context of the pain and struggle of Iraqis under a strict government. The surreal setting of an airport and airplane embodies as a powerful symbol of the characters' longing for freedom and the weight of their unfulfilled dreams. This imagery is a testament to the resilience of people in the face of loss and uncertainty and to the power of hope as a lifeline even in the darkest times. Meanwhile, the play also reinforces the indomitable spirit of humanity and hope to overcome despair. While the play has many dark moments, the airplane represents both the possibility to escape and the unfulfilled dreams of ordinary Iraqis, embodying the dichotomy between the tragedy of their situation and the promise of a brighter future (Hassani, 2022). The aim of this study is to explore if *Cartoon Dreams* is a vision of ultimate healing and reconciliation for post-conflict Iraq or a vision of survival as the only remaining option.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma is defined thoroughly by J. R. Kurtz (2018); he explains the origin of trauma and how it has been understood as a psychological wound and not just a physical wound. His definition of trauma is:

Fundamentally, trauma is a wound. This, at least, is its Greek origin, where it denotes a physical injury from an external cause.... Today, however, we more frequently use the term trauma to describe emotional or psychological injury, as opposed to bodily harm. If someone claims to have been traumatized, we assume they have suffered a frightening or shocking experience, but that they wish to emphasize its emotional impact rather than any physical injury. We think of trauma as a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events, or by the threat of such events, which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms. (pp. 1-2) Collective trauma, on the other hand, has a tremendous impact on the heart of a community, slowly tearing apart the social fabric and destroying identity that holds communities together. Collective trauma is not a single event, but a gradual process that occurs when the feeling of belonging and communal support is lost. Such trauma can be passed down through generations and can impact not only the individual but the society, as they are all in a struggle to find meaning and identity (Hirschberger, 2018).

Collective Trauma in *Cartoon Dreams*

Iraq's history is a textbook case of collective trauma. The country has been through endless wars, dictatorship and foreign intervention, all of which have had a significant impact on the country's collective traumatic experience. The series of wars left the people with psychological scars, economic problems and a divided national identity. Sheghaidil's *Cartoon Dreams* is set against this political restive and generational anguish. Set in a dreamlike world, an airport transforms into an airplane during a collective dream. The imaginative environment is a metaphor of common suffering and tribulations of Iraqi society. The characters (Singer, Soldier, Radical, Intellectual) are different segments of a community profoundly impacted by war, displacement and social fragmentation. The play uses the stories to explore how collective trauma impacts all and depicts a society that wants to end its problems but cannot stop its painful past. People's desire to fly is a universal desire to break free from the chaos and suffering of war and oppression. "All people dream of flying. Every one of us has been packing up his dreams in suitcases for years. Catastrophes delay our lives. Nothing is left" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 148), as the Soldier says. It is a moment in time capturing a collective trauma that becomes a collective desire for freedom in spite of the repeated tragedies. Memories play a big role in the play. The Soldier's words, "We should not forget! Always remember, so that we don't repeat the same disaster", (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 151) is contrasted to the Intellectual's "Forget, *yem awed*, just forget!" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 150). The exchange emphasizes the dichotomy of confronting challenging experiences and the desire to forget, which is often experienced in communities with shared traumatic experiences. The play is a cartoon in which the oddity and dysfunction of life after war are emphasized. "What's broken is us, not the plane" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 160), as the Intellectual says, is a metaphor for the broken identities of individuals and communities that are a result of conflict. This surreal style emphasizes the chaos and confusion left behind by collective trauma, and the difficulty in rebuilding one's life. Sheghaidil demonstrates the impact of collective trauma through imaginative imagery and using various characters in *Cartoon Dreams*. The soldier's words, "The executioner is always an executioner, but the victims forget. They're the same people who killed us before and came back to kill us again" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 151), demonstrate how violence is ongoing and continues to cause suffering from one generation to the next. *Cartoon Dreams* is a story of a community that is weighed down by its past but trying to move forward while still feeling the weight of its collective pain through its imaginative setting, symbolism, and profound dialogue.

The Airport and Airplane as Memory Spaces

According to Arnold-de Simine (2018), memory is not a static representation of the past, but a dynamic and imaginative process that is constantly reworked based on the present fears, desires and social realities. People do not just recall what they have stored in their memory, but they also recreate it in a manner that is consistent with their current lives (p. 140). Trauma makes this process very complex, as painful past event are seen and re-examined in a way that is tinged with suffering, uncertainty, and longing. The airport and the airplane are the symbols of this psychological struggle in *Cartoon Dreams*. These settings are emotional memories, not only because of the characters past traumas, but also because of their competing visions for the future. Another point made by Arnold-de Simine is that “place, not time, is the sign of memory and trauma” (2018, p. 140). This notion is key to *Cartoon Dreams*, for the airport and airplane are not just settings but symbolic spaces that carry traumatic memories. The airport is a place of waiting and transition, mirroring the characters’ feelings of entrapment. They wish to go forward, but their agonizing past prevents them. “Neither in Heaven nor on Earth” as the Radical puts it (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 153). The soldier also affirms “We have spent our entire lives hanging in between” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 153). This is a limbo, a liminal space, in which individuals do not know if they can ever forget their past. The airport is then not only a physical space but a psychological one in which memory entraps the characters in cycles of trauma. The airplane, however, represents the hope for freedom and escape. It is a place where the characters would like to forget their problems, but it is only in their imagination. The Intellectual says, “Everyone dreams of flying. We’ve been dreaming our lives away. Even dreaming was forbidden. We dream quietly, and we don’t tell anybody about our dreams, so we won’t be punished” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 147). This demonstrates how much the unfair government oppresses its subjects, even if their dreams of freedom are suppressed. The airplane symbolizes escape and is meaningless because they cannot hope or believe in change because of fear. Both the airport and the airplane reflect the effects of trauma on memory for the Iraqis after the fall of the oppressive regime. The airport represents being stuck in the past, unable to move forward from years of fear and control, and the airplane represents a desire for freedom, although it may be unattainable. People’s fractured identities and collective suffering make it difficult to move forward, even after the regime has fallen, as the Intellectual says, “What’s broken is us, not the plane” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 160). The dreamlike spaces also show how trauma can bring together reality and hope, and how the scars of the past continue to impact the present and future. The airport and airplane are not simply locations, but rather emblems of the fight for recovery and meaning following adversity. The play implies that the process of healing trauma is to confront the burden of memories and to have the courage to envision and hope for a new future as the Soldier states, “We shall not hold ourselves hostage. Enough” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 165). Kareem Sheghaidil’s *Cartoon Dreams* is a collection of characters that embody the dilemmas, hopes, and struggles of Iraqi society in the wake of years of war and oppression. The characters depict different social types, reflecting the tensions between tradition, change, and individual freedom (K. Sheghaidil, personal communication, January 6, 2025). The Soldier is the disillusioned fighter, who has seen too many wars. He is a man who has been molded by years of war, who has the scars of violence and loss. His refusal to go to war is not only his personal exhaustion, but also the desire of the people, who have been experiencing the war for decades, for peace (K. Sheghaidil, personal communication, January 6, 2025). This is evident when he says, “Aren’t you tired yet of carrying your soldier’s duffel bag?!” “Oh man, just fly free, you’ve been carrying a bag on your back all your life” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 147). His desire to be free demonstrates his desire to overcome the suffering of war, but his memories plague him: “How can I forget?” Can I forget the shrapnel in my body? Or the sound of the bullets still ringing in my ears?” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 150). The Intellectual is a representative of thinkers from all sides of the political spectrum, who are lost in the ideal world he imagines. He challenges authority but is sometimes trapped in the metaphysical realm of political ideas and not action. The Intellectual’s journey mirrors the challenges of navigating idealism in the face of the stark realities of life in post-war Iraq, where aspirations for a better future can be at odds with the weight of unresolved trauma and systemic issues (K. Sheghaidil, personal communication, January 6, 2025). His idealism is further shown when he says, “We were deceived and cast as victims. We have been well- trained in that role” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 152). The intellectual is faced with the challenge of turning dreams into reality. The Singer represents the ambitious artist, a creative and hopeful voice, who is silenced by social and religious restrictions. She advocates for people who want to be seen for their talents but are limited by a society that does not fully appreciate artistic expression (K. Sheghaidil, personal communication, January 6, 2025). She expresses her frustration in saying, “I have to call out the names of fans so that they throw money at me on the stage” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 160). Despite these difficulties, she is determined to be appreciated, which indicates a desire for a time when art was valued. The radical means religious extremism and strictness, and it is the forces that attempt to control others with rigid

beliefs and rules (K. Sheghaidil, personal communication, January 6, 2025). This is reflected in his saying “Life is an endless war” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 152). This statement is an explanation of how his worldview is influenced by conflict and reinforces the idea that there must always be conflict and control to survive.

Through these four characters, Sheghaidil portrays a panoramic picture of a society struggling with the effects of war, the weight of tradition, and the hope for change. All characters are affected by trauma, which affects their behavior and attitudes. The Soldier remembers war, he cannot forget the violence he has seen, he wants peace, but he cannot forget his scars. The trauma of the intellectual is that he is cut off from reality, years of oppression have left him in idealistic, unattainable dreams. The Singer’s anguish is that she is living in a society that does not allow her to be creative, and to do what she wants, but makes her conform, and she is torn between her ambitions and the fear of being judged. Radical’s chronic stress is a need for order and control to deal with uncertainty and instability, which is the cause of his rigid worldview. Amidst the suffering, there are glimpses of strength and hope as the characters struggle to survive, with some refusing to fight, others clinging to art, and others still dreaming of a better future. They collectively illustrate the way in which trauma can hold people back and the desire for freedom and renewal.

The Burden of the Past

The past is heavy and the trauma of oppressive regimes that take away the individual’s freedom and crush his dreams is deep. This burden is an “unresolved legacy that insistently and repetitively haunts the traumatized victims” (Mohammed, 2021, p. 21). Kareem Sheghaidil’s *Cartoon Dreams* reflects this legacy, with characters caught in a surreal space, representing the suffocation of years of authoritarian rule. This yearning is expressed by the Singer: “Everyone wants to forget everything, to leave it all behind and fly away” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 147). But their aspirations of flight only highlight their confinement, and the suffocating regime keeps them down with fear and loss. This is what Cathy Caruth calls the inescapable burden of trauma, in which “the history of the traumatized individual is nothing other than the determined repetition of the event of destruction” (Caruth, 1996, p. 63). The people of *Cartoon Dreams* do not just remember their pain, they experience it repeatedly, in a vicious cycle that will not let go of the past. The Intellectual in *Cartoon Dreams* is weighed down by his knowledge of how oppressive regimes have used fear to divide and control society. His words “Governments create enemies to keep us busy. That’s why they sometimes call you a traitor, sometimes a spy, sometimes a collaborator” (Sheghaidil, 2014, p. 156) echo his frustration with these tactics, which undermined trust and eroded the collective spirit necessary for progress. This awareness paralyzes him and keeps him in a loop of thinking and regretting what he lost. In the same way, The Singer longs for freedom, for her lost identity as an artist. She reflects:

I dreamt that I would express myself through art. Lovely songs. Happiness and peace. But then I discovered that songs are burdened with sadness. And poetry flows from anguish. And step by step, songs became hard for me. Like a broken drum that gives you a headache. (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 162).

She feels silenced and forgotten, and her pain is the lack of that. But she has hope that she can find a way to reconnect with her art as a means of healing. The Soldier carries the burden of war, and he says, “And by accident, the bullets didn’t find our hearts. We’re bleeding all over, but for what? The war grew up with us and made us old, but she never got any older. She feeds on our flesh, and it keeps her young” (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 150). He says that war is a living thing that feeds on its victims, and that he and others have scars, but it does not change. His burden is the reminder of the sacrifices made and the futility of their suffering, particularly in Iraq during the war years, when endless conflict and suffering occurred. The phrase ‘bleeding all over’ is a reference to his physical and emotional wounds, which he cannot heal. Although the playwright depicts the characters’ eagerness to unburden themselves from the pain of their past, and create a dreamlike world to ease their hearts, they remain stuck, spinning in circles that they cannot outrun. They are ensnared by an unbroken chain; merciless rules pull them tight. Cruelty crushes their hope.

The Shadow of Hope and Healing in Dark Times

Hope is a strong emotion that can help individuals through difficult times and envision a brighter future. It refers to “a belief that something will happen or will be true” (Shivley, 2019, p. 3). Further, Snyder et al. (1991) state that hope is “a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful agency (goal-directed determination) and pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)” (p. 571). Kareem Sheghaidil demonstrates in *Cartoon Dreams* that hope is an integral element of his characters’ lives, as they face the burden of oppression in Iraq. Their dreams and hopes become a means of resisting, and they come to believe that there is a future beyond their pain. Flight is a recurring symbol, representing both a desire to escape and a hope for change. Flight is a long-awaited opportunity for some to regain control of their lives. The Intellectual, who wants to get

out of his small world, desires his freedom:

Finally, I will travel, even though it's late. Never mind. The important thing is, I will wander through the great cities of culture, art, and literature. I will see all kinds of people, airports, cities, historical places, libraries . . . Aahh, I have spent my life in prison. From the depths of my despair, I find it hard to believe that I'm in the airport now. I hope I can keep flying all my life. I want to go to an air-conditioned movie theatre, with a beautiful woman on my arm. I'm a bit old now for such things . . . (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 147)

This is a passage that shows how hope can keep people alive, even in the most challenging circumstances. The Intellectual wants to delve into culture and literature, and prove that hope is not simply about survival, it is about reclaiming. His words expose the mind's response to oppression, and how dreams can be a means of escaping a harsh reality. He is not just idealism but an act of resistance, a belief in change.

Likewise, the Soldier clutches onto the hope of a new life, a new identity, a new beginning, "I hope I can get a job, refugee status, anything. At least I'll live the rest of my life as a human being" (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 147). Despite the characters' doubts and fears, they know that they need hope to survive.

Hope is a theme that is echoed throughout *Cartoon Dreams*, as hope can often persevere in the face of adversity. Research about hope in conflict zones shows that hope for the future is not necessarily a function of the circumstances but rather can stand alone. Leshem and Halperin (2020) explain this phenomenon in their study on hope in long-term conflicts:

One of the most profound conclusions is that people can live in harsh political circumstances but hold optimistic views about the future, while others could be living in benign political conditions but adopt a pessimistic outlook about future war and peace. Stated more generally, it seems that citizens' hopes for the future may be consistent with their political circumstance or in defiance of it. (Leshem & Halperin, 2020, p. 193)

This concept is directly related to Sheghaidil's characters who are clinging to hope in the face of political oppression and instability. They do not necessarily believe that they have made progress toward a better future, but they do believe that they will not accept permanent suffering. This strength enables them to withstand oppression mentally even if they have little control over their material circumstances.

Sheghaidil demonstrates in *Cartoon Dreams* how hope can sustain people and help them cope with trauma and remain human in challenging times. The characters persevere in their hope, whatever happens, whether through their own dreams or through their misfortunes or through their moments of help. Even in a world full of instability, their dreams remain as a form of resistance. Hope can overcome the darkness and bring about a change. Hope is the only thing that can help them through the darkness, even if it seems distant. Without it, life is impossible. Hope is not just a thought, it is power, it is something tangible that sustains them. It provides them with the power to overcome and to get back up. Hope is beautifully described as something that "rises up and grips the soul in the darkest night, inspiring it to reach beyond the darkness" (Berry et al., 2024, p. 18).

Irony as a Coping Mechanism

Sheghaidil is a master of irony, and he uses this as a potent storytelling device to reveal the paradoxes of faith and survival in Iraq under the authoritarian regime, and after the American invasion. It is defined as "a figure of speech which expresses the opposite of what is literally (usually) meant by the words used" (Dynel, 2017, p. 4). The Radical's character is ironic because it reveals that people are compelled to sacrifice their values due to trauma, fear, and changing power dynamics. Sheghaidil uses verbal, situational, and dramatic irony to illustrate how people's beliefs become uncertain and change in the face of crisis. A good example of verbal irony is when the Radical asks himself whether flying is religiously acceptable, but then drops his doubts when it is in his own interest: I am not sure whether it's *halal* or *haram* to embark on a plan. Oh what the heck, we have no choice. Am I fortunate enough to fly and escape this heat and dust and to be treated for my asthma? And I can also have surgery on my eyes before I go blind. Where would I go if I became a blind man here? (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 148) His words show the difference between his religious devotion and his willingness to give it up for survival. This reflects the general situation in Iraq, where principles are sometimes altered, and life is made hard. It also shows how Hassan Blasim describes this phenomenon, saying: People in the street in Iraq make jokes when a bomb goes off. They joke about death because it's normal – they have lived for a long time with war. If you don't make these kinds of dirty jokes, if you don't embrace that black humor, you can't survive. (Blasim, 2013) The Radical is like the Iraqis Blasim describes in that he uses irony to deal with his reality. His contradictions are not only hypocrisy, but a way to control his uncontrollable world. The soldier's conversation with him is an example of situational irony, as he says he is not religious, yet he is making money from selling religious items:

Soldier: Look, I've been told that you go to the mosque every day.

Radical: No, no, I go there to sell things.

Soldier: What do you mean? Are you begging there?

Radical: No, sir, I sell rosaries and other religious items.

Soldier: So when do you go out drinking?

Radical: After I pray, right? (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 157)

This is the time that exposes his hypocrisy, that he denies religious faith but benefits from them. He admits that he drinks after prayers, which demonstrates his ability to change his beliefs easily.

The most pathetic application of dramatic irony is when the Radical, who plays by the rules of the system, ultimately becomes its victim:

Soldier: Listen, do you know how many charges we have against you right now? First, you're a petty thief, the punishment for which is execution. Second, you're attacking the government, which means you're offending the sovereignty of a nationalistic and patriotic country, and the punishment for this is also execution. Third, you're accused of agitating people against the government, which is high treason.

Radical: This is the Mother of all Executions! (Sheghaidil, 2017, p. 159)

It's a very ironic downfall, he tries to fit in with the system for his own good, but it ultimately turns against him. This demonstrates that under authoritarianism, even those who learn to play the game are not secure.

The Radical's contradictions are not only opportunism, but they are also his survival tactic in a world of fear and instability. His changing perspectives are an accurate portrayal of life in an unjust regime: either conform or die. His story is a cautionary tale that even those who go along with it are not safe from it in oppressive regimes.

A Nation in Constant Trigger: The Endless Echo of Trauma

Iraq is a country that has been denied the opportunity to heal. All attempts to heal have only led to new wounds and the country has been living a vicious cycle of suffering since 2003. The burden of war, dictatorship, occupation and internal conflict has not lightened over time, but rather has morphed, from one crisis to another. The past is not buried, it is lived again. Iraq has been living for decades in a state of trauma, as Awfa Hussein Mohammed (2021) puts it, "a world of darkness, where the sun never sets" (p. 28). Governments rise and fall, promising stability, but only contributing to the disillusionment. Power has been split between various groups, each of which has its interests, and unity and the sounds of survival are unattainable. Healing is not a point or a place, but an ongoing process of adapting and transforming over the course of life (LaLonde, 2018). People say that time heals all wounds, but *Cartoon Dreams* shows that time does not heal trauma, it just shows people how to carry it. Trauma is not something that can be forgotten, it is stored in memory and will emerge when triggered. The past can be revived by a familiar sound, a familiar place, or a moment of fear, and people experience their pain as if it had just happened. The characters, like the Iraqi people, do not heal, they survive. Hope sustains them and enables them to persevere, but neither can change the past, and irony helps them to make sense of a world that often seems absurd. It does not mean that they must be free of their trauma, it means that they have to learn to live with it. War is not something that can be left behind, it comes back in other forms, impacting each new generation. In Iraq, the past is not just remembered, it is lived. The people's suffering is not only due to the past wars, but also due to the current power struggles. Since 2003, democracy and stability have been promised in Iraq, but obstacles have littered the way. This cycle of violence and suffering continues and is passed on to future generations, and Iraqis find themselves in a history that will not end. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma is a useful lens over time. She explains that when trauma first occurs, it is not understood because it is too sudden and too harsh. Rather, it comes back later in bits and pieces, as nightmares, flashbacks or repetition of behaviors, requiring survivors to relive what they were unable to process at the time. Caruth highlights the fundamental principles of trauma as being "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth, 1996, p.4). This paradox, which shows an event that is both past and present, is a sign of the disruption of the normal flow of time and of the histories that are marked by repetition rather than resolution. It means that trauma can be passed on through generations and cultures, through stories and testimonies that continue to keep it alive. The characters in *Cartoon Dreams* think that they will be safe if they can only leave chaos in their country. Exile is not a cure; it is another wound. The past does not remain behind, it follows them, it is in their memories, it appears in their dreams. In general, people take their pain with them on the road. The love of a person for his country is indestructible. Although the body is gone, the heart is still bound to the land that once belonged to it. LaLonde reiterates the point that healing is an ongoing process, in which people learn to live with their trauma, using their experience to build resilience and meaningful

relationships with others (LaLonde, 2018). This is a theme that is well explored in *Cartoon Dreams*, as the characters do not find resolutions, but rather learn to cope, with hope and irony as their weapons of survival.

Conclusion

Iraq is a land that has never known peace, with war and tyrannical rule leaving the past an open wound that will never heal. In *Cartoon Dreams*, Kareem Sheghaidil does not provide solace and does not suggest that hope is sufficient to mend the broken. He depicts a reality of trauma lived and re-lived, of the weight of history too heavy to bear, and even dreams as survival strategies. But in this darkness, something refuses to die. Hope, small, fragile, gasping for air, lives in the Soldier who dreams beyond war, in the Singer who refuses to be silenced, in the Intellectual who is lost in ideas but clinging to something more, and even in the Radical who struggles to make sense of life, and to believe that no matter what, a better future is still possible. Hope does not simply remain in the shadows during suffering, it is the spark that illuminates their path and makes it clear that hope is not just a thing they want, but a thing that can change their world. Moreover, irony, the bitter and cruel laughter of those who have seen too much, is a defense mechanism in a world that does not care. The Radical is a questioner who flies, and the Soldier is a joker who is broken, the Intellectual is a speaker of freedom who is entrapped. This study has shown that neither hope nor irony can erase trauma, but they keep people from drowning in it. People do not forget, but they manage to carry the past without being destroyed. They struggle to forget, but most of all they endure, dream and resist, because hope is still there in the darkest of their suffering, and sometimes, that is enough.

References

- Alsharqiya Series. (2014, January 30). Interview with the actors of the play "Cartoon Dreams" in Baghdad [Video]. YouTube. URL <https://youtu.be/eArshjeGB1I>
- Arnold-de Simine, S. (2018). Trauma and memory. In J. R. Kurtz (Ed.), *Trauma and literature* (pp. 140–153). Cambridge University Press.
- Berry, C., Acharya, N., & Crowter, L. (2024). The light at the end of the tunnel? A systematic review of higher education student experiences of hope. *PLOS ONE*, 19 (6). URL <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304596>
- Blasim, H. (2013). Hassan Blasim: Once upon a time in Iraq. *The Skinny*. URL <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/books/features/hassan-blasim-once-upon-a-time-in-iraq>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cazes, S. (2003, February). The Iraqi Media: 25 Years of Relentless Repression. *Reporters Without Borders*. URL <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/rsf/2003/en/57639>
- Dynel, M. (2017). The irony of irony: Irony based on truthfulness. *Corpus Pragmatics*, 1(1), 23–37. URL <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41701-016-0003-6>
- Hassani, H. T. (2022). *A representation of national identity: A post-colonial study of selected Irish and Iraqi plays* [Unpublished master's thesis, Tikrit University, College of Education for Humanities, English Department].
- Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective trauma and the social construction of meaning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. URL <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>
- Kurtz, J. R. (Ed.). (2018). *Trauma and literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leshem, O. A., & Halperin, E. (2020). Hope during conflict. In Steven C. van de Heuvel (ed.) *Historical and multidisciplinary perspectives on hope* (pp. 179–196). Springer.
- Mahdi, N. A. (2022). Re-formation State: The Political Procedures in Iraq (2003–2006). *Political Issues*, 66. URL <https://doi.org/10.58298/2021129>
- Mohammed, A. H. (2021). *War wounds between verbalization and silence*. Dar Al Hadatha.
- Sheghaidil, K. (2017). *Cartoon Dreams*. In A. Al-Azraki & J. Al-Shamma (Eds.), *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (pp. 145–167). Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Sheghaidil, K. (2025). Personal communication. January 6, 2025.
- Shivley, J. M. (2019). Interrogating hope theory. Mississippi State University. URL <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331716426>
- Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., Yoshinobu, L. J., Gibb, J., Langelle, C., & Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 570–585. URL https://ou.edu/content/dam/Tulsa/research/The-Will-and-the-Ways_Validation-of-Hope_Snyder.pdf