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Narrating War Trauma: Memory, Violence, and Fragmentation in Frankenstein in Baghdad and The Things They Carried

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ABSTRACT

The article provides a comparison of Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi and The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, claiming that both works use the concept of ethical fragmentation, a conscious breaking of the narrative unity as a moral reaction to mass violence. It has three claims based on trauma theory by Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Marianne Hirsch, and postcolonial critique by Stef Craps: OBrien uses metafiction and Saadawi polyphony are different but ethically similar; their difference is combatant-civilian asymmetry; and dialogic reading shows the limitations of Western models of individual trauma and emphasizes collective witnessing. The paper suggests a Memory-Violence-Representation nexus and the idea of a communal mnemonic archive, which places the novel by Saadawi at the center of the world trauma literature and contributes to developing the instruments of analyzing postcolonial trauma.

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Keywords: ethical fragmentation; war trauma narratives; Frankenstein in Baghdad; The Things They Carried; postcolonial trauma studies; communal mnemonic archive; comparative literature

سرديات صدمة الحرب: الذاكرة والعنف والتشظي في روايتي فرانكشتاين في بغداد والأشياء التي حملوها

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المُستخلص

تقدم هذه المقالة مقارنة بين روايتي "فرانكشتاين في بغداد" لأحمد السعداوي و"الأشياء التي حملوها" لتيم أوبراين، مؤكدةً أن العملين يستخدمان مفهوم التفكك الأخلاقي، أي الكسر الواعي لوحدة السرد كرد فعل أخلاقي على العنف الجماعي. وتستند المقالة إلى ثلاثة ادعاءات مبنية على نظرية الصدمة النفسية لكاثي كاروث، ودومينيك لاكابرا، وماريان هيرش، والنقد ما بعد الاستعماري لستيف كرابس: يستخدم أوبراين أسلوب ما وراء السرد، بينما يستخدم السعداوي أسلوب التعدد الصوتي، وهما مختلفان لكنهما متشابهان أخلاقياً؛ ويكمن الاختلاف بينهما في عدم التكافؤ بين المقاتل والمدني؛ وتُظهر القراءة الحوارية قصور النماذج الغربية للصدمة الفردية، وتؤكد على أهمية الشهادة الجماعية. وتقترح المقالة وجود صلة بين الذاكرة والعنف والتمثيل، وفكرة الأرشيف التذكاري الجماعي، مما يضع رواية السعداوي في صميم أدب الصدمة النفسية العالمي، ويسهم في تطوير أدوات تحليل الصدمة النفسية ما بعد الاستعمارية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التشظّي الأخلاقي؛ سرديات صدمة الحرب؛ فرانكشتاين في بغداد؛ الأشياء التي حملوها؛ دراسات الصدمة ما بعد الاستعمار؛ الأرشيف التذكّري الجماعي؛ الأدب المقارن

1. Introduction

The literary account of the trauma of the war takes one of the most ethically problematic places in modern letters. Ever since Theodor Adorno (1983) provoked with his claim about the barbarity of poetry after extreme violence, a constitutive tension has been experienced by scholars: the need to testify to suffering and the inability to do so sufficiently by the traditional narrative means. In this regard, war fiction, especially, has to negotiate what Michael Rothberg (2009) refers to as the multidirectional pressures of competing memories, what Judith Butler (2009) terms the differential grievability of war dead, and what Elaine Scarry (1985) theorizes as the inherent ability of violence to unmake the body and the language that can be used to describe it. Whether war can be narrated is not the main issue, but whether the prevailing modes of such narration are sufficient to the ethical, epistemic, and affective needs of traumatic experience, and whose experience is accorded to the literary and critical seriousness it requires.

The article introduces two masterpieces of modern war fiction that have seldom been read together: The Things They Carried (1990) by Tim O'Brien, a linked story cycle set during and after the Vietnam War, and Frankenstein in Baghdad (2013; English translation by Jonathan Wright, 2018) by Ahmed Saadawi, a polyphonic novel set in post-2003 Baghdad. Both works have spawned significant individual critical corpora: O Briens has been discussed as a paradigmatic American war story (Kaplan, 1993; Heberle, 2001; Farrell, 2014), and Saadawi, the winner of the International Prize of Arabic Fiction, has gained increasing attention as a significant contribution to the post-invasion Iraqi fiction (Caiani, 2018; Masmoudi, 2020; Bahoora, 2015). But the continued comparative analysis of Western and non-Western war trauma discourses is still underdeveloped in the discipline, a gap that is symptomatic of what Stef Craps (2013) has termed the endemic Western centrism of trauma studies itself.

The main argument of this paper is that both Frankenstein in Baghdad and The Things They Carried use what this paper calls ethical fragmentation: a narrative technique of intentional disintegration of plot, chronology, narrative control, a refusal to make the experience of war trauma digestible, closed, and consumable. Nevertheless, the two texts perform ethical fragmentation in radically different modalities that indicate an asymmetry in the subject position that is not adequately theorised in the existing literature: O Brien writes in the position of the combatant narrating retrospectively in the aftermath of a war fought in a foreign land; Saadawi writes in the position of the civilian community narrating contemporaneously in the midst of the destruction of their home. This asymmetry, the article claims, does not only generate different themes or cultural inflections but essentially different epistemologies of traumatic testimony- different assumptions about who is the burden of witness, how violence is distributed across the social body, and what forms of narrative are sufficient to collective as opposed to individual suffering.

More importantly, this article creates a dialogue and not a parallel comparison. The comparison of Saadawi with O'Brien does not only show the difference in culture; it shows the structural constraints in the individualised mode of O'Brien that only become evident when contrasted with a collective alternative. The monopolization of traumatic agency by one narrator-consciousness, the characteristic of Western trauma narration since Remarque to Vonnegut to O'Brien, becomes apparent, in the light of the polyphony of Saadawi, as a particular cultural option instead of a universal literary imperative, which necessarily focuses the experience of the combatant at the expense of the civilian populations who are the most affected by armed conflict. Reading OBrien and Saadawi, on the other hand, helps one see the affective price of polyphonic dispersal: the psychological intimacy and moral particularity that OBrien attains by having his narrator retell the story compulsively and guilt-ridden is exactly what the collective mode of Saadawi loses in her insistence on distributing testimony among an entire community of witnesses.

This article has three contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it suggests a new conceptual vocabulary, which is ethical fragmentation, the communal mnemonic archive, the Memory-Violence-Representation Nexus, to examine the formal and ethical strategies of war trauma narration in cultural contexts. Second, it offers the formal-analytical vocabulary that Craps (2013), Visser (2011), and others have demanded in the promotion of postcolonial trauma studies: a toolkit of relating the critique of Western-centric trauma theory to the close analysis of literary practices. Third, it contends that Frankenstein in Baghdad should be recognized as a significant piece of literary art, and should be given the same theoretical seriousness, cultural respect, and ethical care that has traditionally been given canonical Western war fiction.

2. Literature Review

The Things They Carried is a topic of scholarship that comprises one of the largest critical corpora in modern American war literature. The influential reading of Catherine Calloway (1995) made the narrative technique of O'Brien essentially involved in the gap between the truth of happening and the truth of story, as the metafictional self-reflexivity of the collection is the enactment of the

epistemological crisis that trauma brings about. Kaplan (1993) analyzed the undying uncertainty of the narrator and Heberle (2001) provided a sustained analysis on O'Brien as a trauma artist whose formal innovations cannot be separated from the psychological dynamics of traumatic memory. Silbergleid (2009) furthered this line of questioning by examining the autobiographical metafiction of the collection as a means of making the absent past present. More recently, Vernon (2018) has placed O'Brien in the context of American literary responses to moral injury, relating his work to the changing clinical and philosophical conceptualizations of the psychological injuries that soldiers who violate their own moral codes experience.

Nonetheless, this scholarship has been mostly enclosed within the confines of the American literary studies and the Western canon of war writing. Comparative readings that juxtapose OBrien with non-Western war texts, especially Arabic, South Asian, or African conflict literature, are extremely uncommon. In cases where comparative strategies have been pursued, they have generally matched O Brien with other Anglophone authors (Pat Barker, Kevin Powers, Phil Klay) instead of addressing literature which tell war using radically different subject positions. This parochialism has constrained the ability of the field to differentiate between what is universal and what is culturally specific in the narration strategies of O'Brien, and it has supported the implicit belief that the individualised, combatant-centred mode of trauma narration is a natural or default literary reaction to war and not a specific cultural construction.

Since the English translation of the novel in 2018, critical attention to Frankenstein in Baghdad has grown considerably. The novel was read at first as political allegory by early critical engagements, which saw the Whatsitsname creature (al-Shisma) as an embodiment of the monstrous reasoning of sectarian violence (Qualey, 2018). Caiani (2018) and Snir (2017) placed the novel in the context of Arabic literature history, and Bahoora (2015) provided a theoretically rich interpretation of post-2003 Iraqi fiction as writing about the dismembered nation. Masmoudi (2020) suggested reading Saadawi in the context of the Iraqi Gothic and focus on how the novel alters the conventions of horror to respond to the reality of violence in Baghdad. Al-Musawi (2006) offered the necessary contextual background by recording how the Iraqi literary culture has been negotiating the connection between narrative form and political violence long. More recently, Al Hashemi (2025) has examined how post-invasion Baghdad novels, such as Burhan Shawi's Baghdad Morgue, construct place as a symbol that embodies the chaos, death, and turmoil of the occupied city, illustrating the broader scholarly recognition of formal sophistication in post-2003 Iraqi fiction and its capacity to encode collective traumatic experience through narrative structure.

Despite these contributions, the current research on Frankenstein in Baghdad has two major limitations that this article aims to fulfil. To begin with, the current focus on allegory and satire has been inclined to instrumentalise the formal sophistication of the novel, to subordinate its narrative innovations to the service of political commentary instead of addressing them as complex responses to the formal and moral demands of the trauma novel in the same ambition and success as canonical Western war fiction. As Haytham Bahoora (2015, p. 189) has noted, post-2003 Iraqi fiction requires critical frameworks that do not dismiss these works as documents of political crisis but instead take seriously the aesthetic and formal aspects of the works. Second, comparative readings that put Saadawi

in conversation with Western war fiction, with careful consideration of the various subject positions through which trauma is told, are still largely missing in the literature.

In trauma theory, the seminal contributions of Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996), Dominick LaCapra (2001) and Judith Herman (1992) have been the leading paradigms of how traumatic experience, memory and narrative are related. The theorisation of trauma as not being fully assimilated now of the event, but returning later, in repetitive, intrusive forms, has been especially influential in the study of literature, and has been used to explain the reasons why trauma narratives take non-linear, repetitive, and fragmented forms. The distinction between acting out and working through LaCapra has provided scholars with a useful heuristic in the analysis of the various narrative positions that texts take on the traumatic past. The idea of postmemory by Hirsch (2012) has provided fruitful possibilities in terms of how trauma is conveyed and modified across time and social space.

However, even the theory of trauma has been subject to critical scrutiny over its Western bias. Craps (2013) claimed that the prevailing models, which were formulated mainly in connection with the Holocaust, failed to explain the perpetual, structural, and collective aspects of violence in the Global South. Rothberg (2009) suggested the idea of multidirectional memory to oppose the competitive model where various traumas compete to be noticed, and instead, indicated that memories of separate historical violences could be mutually facilitating. Visser (2011) proposed a decolonisation of trauma studies that would be responsive to non-Western aesthetic cultures and collective forms of suffering. Veena Das (2007), who operated in the partition of India and the Bhopal disaster, showed how the experience and narration of trauma in South Asian contexts was done through communal, embodied, and quotidian practices that transcended the individualist models of Western psychoanalysis. The current research paper picks up these calls by creating a comparative framework that is sensitive to the similarities of war trauma narration as well as the differences that are deeply rooted in the subject position, cultural tradition, and historical circumstance.

The work of Elaine Scarry (1985) on violence and the body is a foundational work that offers another theoretical aspect that is important in the current comparison. The fact that pain, according to Scarry, kills language and that the injured body is a place where the political power inscribes itself is very powerful in the context of the Saadawi novel, where the literal re-creation of the body out of the pieces of the dead turns into the main narrative event. The theorisation of differentiation in the concept of grievability by Butler (2009) introduces another ethical layer, especially in the light of the unequal media coverage of the death of Western and Iraqi soldiers, which is the background in which both novels are set. In the literature of Iraq, Shakir Mustafa (2008) and Muhsin al-Musawi (2006) have recorded the rise of a new generation of post-2003 Iraqi fiction marked by formal experimentation, black humour, and unremitting focus on the destruction of everyday life- the literary environment in which the success of Saadawi should be interpreted.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical frameworks used in this article are three interrelated theories, which include the trauma theory, the memory studies, and the narrative theory, based on the qualitative comparative

literary analysis. It is the combination of these frameworks that makes it possible to analyze the psychological dynamics of traumatic memory, cultural politics of collective remembrance, and formal strategies by which literary texts negotiate the representation of violence.

Based on trauma theory, the paper uses Caruth (1996) idea of traumatic belatedness as a prism through which to interpret the non-linear and repetitive patterns in both primary texts, but extends her approach by applying Craps (2013) postcolonial corrective, which asserts that the concept of trauma theory should take into consideration the collective, ongoing, and structurally produced forms of violence instead of focusing on the singular catastrophic event and its belated return. This twofold involvement enables the analysis to acknowledge the relevance of the Caruth model to O'Brien retrospective narrative and to realise its shortcomings when used in the current narration of the violence by Saadawi. Another heuristic is the framework of acting out and working through by LaCapra (2001), which however complicates the binary since the polyphonic structure of Saadawi is an interstitial phenomenon between pure acting out and complete working through, but which LaCapra framework, which focuses on individual subjects, does not sufficiently address.

Based on the studies of memory, this article interacts with the concept of postmemory by Hirsch (2012) and multidirectional memory by Rothberg (2009). The framework of Hirsch is used to examine the way in which both texts place the reader as a postmemorial inheritor of traumatic testimony, a witness at one remove, but ethically implicated. The idea of Rothberg is mobilised to oppose the competitive logic that would prioritize the traumas of Vietnam veterans over the traumas of Iraqi civilians, and that the comparative reading would help to enlighten both without undermining either. Also, this paper builds on the ethnographic research of Das (2007) on violence and subjectivity to theorise the particularly communal and embodied forms of traumatic memory that the novel by Saadawi performs.

Based on narrative theory, the formal mechanics of fragmentation addressed by this study include non-linear temporality, unreliable narration, polyphony, genre hybridity, and grotesque. Instead of considering these features as incidental, the analysis interprets them as part of the ethical project of each text, what this article suggests as ethical fragmentation. This idea refers to the intentional use of narrative discontinuity as a strategy of opposition to the process of domestifying war trauma into digestible, marketable narratives. As theorised here, ethical fragmentation works in four related dimensions: the formal (disruption of linear narrative), the epistemic (denial of authoritative truth-claims to traumatic experience), the ethical (opposition to the appropriation or resolution of the suffering of others), and the affective (imitation of the disorientation and incoherence of traumatic experience itself). The entire conceptual architecture of this model is shown in figure 2.

3.1 Theoretical Intervention: The Concept of Ethical Fragmentation

This notion of ethical fragmentation is the main theoretical contribution of the article, and it is worth clarifying how it goes beyond the current frameworks. According to Caruth (1996), the explanation of traumatic belatedness is why trauma narratives are fragmented: the initial experience was not completely assimilated and reappears in repetitive and intrusive forms. However, the model of

fragmentation by Caruth is more of a symptom, an unintentional formal result of mental activity. Ethical fragmentation, in its turn, sees narrative discontinuity as an authorial technique: a conscious aesthetic and moral decision to deny unity that would be false to the irreducibility of traumatic experience. Where Caruth poses the question of why the trauma narratives fragment, ethical fragmentation poses the question of what ethical work does fragmentation do, and how does that work vary between cultural and positional contexts?

On the same note, the dichotomy of acting out and working through by LaCapra (2001) offers a good point of departure but falls short of the richness of the two primary texts. The narrator of O Brien seems to be stuck in the performance of acting out, the compulsive repetition without resolution, but his metafictional self-consciousness brings about a reflexive distance that is typical of working through. The polyphonic form of Saadawi spreads testimony among several voices in a manner that cannot be reduced to either pole: it is neither the obsessive compulsiveness of a single traumatised consciousness nor the critical distance of therapeutic working through, but something other, a collective negotiation of trauma that cannot be entirely explained by the individualist paradigm of LaCapra. Ethical fragmentation gives the analytical terms of this interstitial stance: it explains how texts both perform and comment on the impossibility of narrative closure, and how they might do so either individually or collectively.

The idea also directly answers the call of Craps (2013) to formal-analytical instruments that would allow linking the postcolonial critique of trauma theory to the close reading of literary techniques. Craps was correct in stating that the theory of trauma must consider non-Western forms of suffering, but the remedy he offered was still mostly on the plane of theoretical principle and not practical analytical practice. Ethical fragmentation offers such an approach: it offers a model of comparing the ways texts in different cultural and positional situations use formally similar strategies (narrative discontinuity, epistemic uncertainty, affective disorientation) to substantively different ethical ends, conditioned by the dynamics of combatant versus civilian experience, retrospective versus contemporaneous narration, and individual versus collective testimony.

The comparative methodology is carried out by close reading of the two main texts, which is accompanied by the contextual interaction with the historical and cultural circumstances of their creation. The discussion is organized into three thematic axes, which are memory and narrative fragmentation; violence, ethics, and representation; and the comparative dynamics of individual and collective trauma narration. The above theoretical perspectives are applied to each axis. It is not to create a hierarchy between the texts or their traditions, but to clarify how the strategies of each text are a response to the specific demands of the war situation in which it is written, and how the dialogic reading of the texts creates knowledge unavailable to the study of either text alone.

4. Analysis I: Memory and Narrative Fragmentation

4.1 Temporal Loops and Metafictional Return in O'Brien

In The Things They Carried, memory acts as a gravitational field, which distorts narrative time into recursive loops. The structure of the collection, which is the interconnected stories that revolve

around the same events, characters, and moral crises in an obsessive manner, formally performs what Caruth (1996, p.) calls it. 4) defined as the repetitive ownership of the traumatic topic by the experiences that were never fully understood during the time they took place. The flashbacks of the narrator to the death of Kiowa, the murder of the young Vietnamese soldier, and the image of the girl dancing in the ruins are not chronological recollections but obsessive re-performances, with each repetition revealing new aspects of guilt, sorrow, and epistemic confusion. What sets O'Brien apart of the previous American war writers, of Hemingway with his realism and Heller with his absurdism, is the extent to which this obsessive repetition is brought out as the direct object of narrative thought: the narrator of O'Brien does not simply repeat; he meditates on the impossibility of not repeating.

The difference between the happening-truth and the story-truth, which is most clearly expressed in the chapter Good Form, defines the main epistemic statement of O'Brien, the factual correctness of a war narrative is not as significant as its ability to convey the emotional and moral truth of traumatic experience. I want you to experience what I experienced, the narrator says (O'Brien, 1990, p. 171). This prioritization of effective over documentary fidelity is ethical fragmentation in the epistemic aspect: by publicly refusing to resolve the issue of what happened, the text is opposed to the epistemological closure that would turn trauma into settled history. The reader is not given the consolation of knowing whether the narrator killed the young man on the trail near My Khe, and this omission is an ethical gesture, what this article describes as a refusal to allow narrative to be swallowed as solid, appropriate reality.

This fragmentation is further enhanced by the metafictional self-consciousness of O'Brien. The collection is a mixture of autobiography, fiction, memoir, and essay that creates what Heberle (2001) terms a radical indeterminacy that resembles the epistemological crisis that trauma causes. The author-narrator is the same author, but he claims that the stories are fictional; the text admits to lying and then admits to lying about lying. This recursive form accomplishes what LaCapra (2001) defines as acting out: the failure to attain critical distance of the traumatic past, which is expressed through unending compulsive repetition. However, O'Brien adds a complicated factor, which pure acting out would not have: the metafictional consciousness of the narrator of his own repetition is a kind of reflexive distance, pointing towards, but without attaining, the critical view of working through. The text inhabits what this article postulates as the interstitial space of ethical fragmentation between compulsion and reflection between the impossibility of closure and the need to testify further.

The material objects which the collection is named after serve as material anchors to this discontinuous memory. Narratives of identity, fear, and longing are coded in letters, photographs, comic books, tranquillisers, and weapons and can only be partially revealed by the fragmented structure. The meticulous inventory of the first chapter functions both as a realist record and as a mnemonic catalogue and sets the rule that memory in this text is never detached, never unattached to sensory details, and never complete. The letters of Martha delivered to Lieutenant Cross and read and reread with obsessive care and then burned in a futile effort to bring narrative order to chaos are an example of the dynamic that Vernon (2018) describes as the core of the moral injury narrative: the frantic effort to control by ritual what cannot be controlled by knowledge. The items that the soldiers

are holding are pieces of identity that the war will break, and the formal discontinuities of the collection reflect this breaking on the level of narrative form.

4.2 Communal Memory and the Archival Body in Saadawi

When the narrator of O Briens builds memory by repeating it individually, Frankenstein in Baghdad builds it by repeating it collectively. The most interesting formal element of the novel, the composite creature called the Whatsitsname (al-Shisma), which is made of the body parts of various victims of the bombing, serves as what this article would call a communal archive of mnemonics: a character where the fragmented and discontinuous memories and identities of the dead in Baghdad are literally collected into one, unimaginable body. The trace of another life, another death, another loss story is in each part of the body. The body of the creature is not just a gothic or allegorical tool but a material metaphor of how collective trauma is marked on and passed through the material remains of violence which she refers to as the descent of the ordinary into the space of death and back.

The communal mnemonic archive of Saadawi and the individualised memory of O'Brien sheds light on a structural drawback of the Western tradition that Craps (2013) has identified but which the close comparative analysis makes visibly evident. Memory is sovereign in the text of O'Brien: the narrator oversees his memories, rewrites and aestheticises them, deciding which memories to bring forth and in which shapes. This sovereignty of narration is the paradoxical status of the combatant as both perpetrator and victim of violence, an agent who still, however painfully, has some narrative power over his experience. There is no such sovereignty in Baghdad or Saadawi. In Frankenstein in Baghdad, no one has memory; it is shared among a community of witnesses, each with a fragment, which only acquires meaning in relation to fragments possessed by other people. This distribution is literalised in the composite body of the creature: it is a memory that belongs to no one, a body that is put together of parts that belong to no one.

This collective archival role is supported by the polyphonic narrative structure of the novel. Saadawi uses various voices, Hadi the junk dealer, Mahmoud the journalist, Brigadier Majid the intelligence officer, Elishva the old Assyrian Christian woman, each giving a partial, incomplete and even contradictory version. There is no one narrator who is completely informed; there is no one point of view that is given precedence as an authoritative one. This polyphonic dispersion is the most radical form of ethical fragmentation: the text will not be able to unify traumatic experience into a single, coherent narrative, but instead the truth of collective trauma can only be estimated by adding and contrasting many, irreducible testaments. This formal strategy is not incidental to the political involvement of the novel, as Bahoora (2015) has argued, but constitutive of it: the rejection of narrative singularity is the rejection of the totalising narratives, sectarian, national, imperial, which attempt to bring order to the chaos of Baghdad.

The physical instability of the creature, its parts falling away, and needing to be always replaced, reflects the instability of collective memory in a city where the dead are piling up at a much greater rate than that of mourning. The initial intention of Hadi was to make an Iraqi citizen complete out of the parts of the dead- a complete body that could be buried with honor. The animation of the

creature and the further fall into vengeful violence show the inability of such completeness. The Baghdad of Saadawi is a city where even identity has been torn apart by violence, and the formal structure of the novel, its shifting point of view, its disjunction of time, its denial of closure, is the expression of this dislocation on every level.

The figure of Elishva offers one of the most heartrending statements of the connection between memory, loss and the denial of narrative closure in the novel. Her belief that the Whatsitsname animal is her lost son Daniel- missing and assumed dead is not delusion but what Hirsch (2012) would identify as postmemorial investment: the desperate clinging to the fragments and traces that keep the connection alive to the lost. Elishva asks the reader to reflect on the fact that memory works differently in situations of continuous, unresolved violence, where the psychoanalytic distinction between mourning and melancholy fails since the conditions that caused the loss have not been stopped. She is unable to grieve over Daniel since the war that claimed him is not over; her constant hope is not pathological but logical in the irrational temporality of occupation.

The use of various narrative registers in the novel, such as the vernacular narration of Hadi, the journalistic inquiry of Mahmoud, the language of bureaucracy of the intelligence reports of Brigadier Majid, the confessional narrative of the creature on tape, only adds to the communal quality of the archival. The registers are the various institutional and cultural forms of processing traumatic experience: oral tradition, media documentation, state surveillance, and personal testimony. Their opposition, with no individual register being legitimised as authoritative, performs a democratic sharing of narrative authority that reflects the wider ethical concern of the novel to acknowledge the plurality of Iraqi experiences of violence.

Figure 1. Comparative Framework for Ethical Fragmentation

in Individual and Collective War Trauma Narration

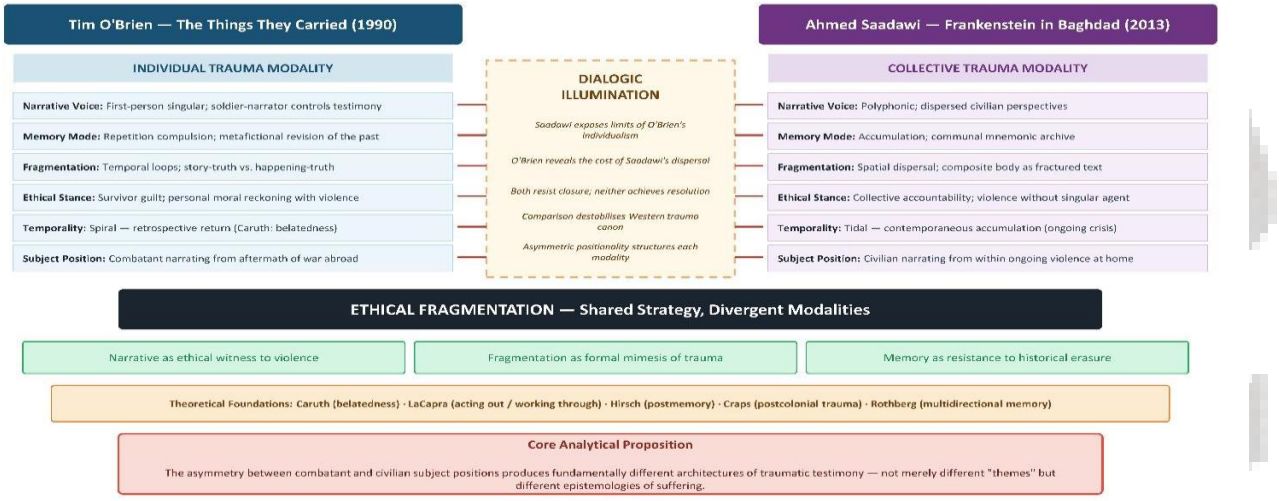

Figure 1. Comparative Framework for Ethical Fragmentation in Individual and Collective War Trauma Narration. This diagram maps the structural divergences between O'Brien's individualised and Saadawi's collective modalities across seven analytical dimensions, with central bidirectional arrows indicating the dialogic illumination each text provides of the other's limitations and strengths. The convergence zone

identifies ethical fragmentation as the shared strategy enacted through divergent modalities. The bottom tier specifies the article's contributions to trauma studies, comparative poetics, and Iraqi literary scholarship.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the two texts diverge systematically across the dimensions of narrative voice, memory mode, fragmentation type, ethical stance, temporality, and subject position, yet converge in their shared deployment of ethical fragmentation as a resistance to narrative closure and historical erasure. Crucially, the bidirectional arrows at the centre of the diagram represent the dialogue reading this article advocates: each text's modality is not merely different from the other's but actively illuminates what the other conceals. Saadawi's polyphony exposes the epistemic limitations of O'Brien's individualised narration; O'Brien's psychological depth reveals the affective costs of Saadawi's collective dispersal. The comparison is not additive but transformative.

5. Analysis II: Violence, Ethics, and Representation

5.1 The Aesthetics of Violence and Moral Injury in O'Brien

The violence that O'Brien depicts is marked by a unique conflict between lyrical beauty and moral horror- a conflict that is the ethical fragmentation in the affective dimension. In a few of the most glorified passages of the collection, the description of the death of Curt Lemon in How to Tell a True War Story, the description of the body of the young Vietnamese man in The Man I (Maybe) Killed, the violence is described with the almost painterly precision which at the same time aestheticises and defamiliarises the process of killing. The repetitive and meticulous descriptions of the wounds of the dead man and the fantasy of his life that the narrator gives serve as a kind of moral restitution: in focusing on the specificity of the body of the victim, the narrator tries to re-create the sense of individuality that the machine of war has erased.

But the text itself is suspicious of this aestheticisation. How to Tell a True War Story challenges the morality of turning violence into narrative beauty, with the warning that when a story appears moral, do not trust it and that the truth about war stories is that they cannot be made to sound comforting (O'Brien, 1990, p. 65). This self-interrogation is a form of ethical fragmentation in the aspect of representation: the text is giving and denying aesthetic consolation, and it does not allow the reader to find a comfortable position with the violence recounted. The impact is to recreate, at the reading experience level, what Vernon (2018) describes as moral injury: the failure to stabilize to the point of making judgments or cognizing what one has seen or done.

Subject position further complicates the ethics of the violence representation by O'Brien. The narrator is a fighter who has been killed, and his traumatic guilt cannot be separated with the fact that he is an agent of violence he is talking about. The ethical weight of testimony is obnoxiously personal: it is the guilt of the narrator, the nightmares of the narrator, the obsessive retelling of the narrator. This individualisation creates an almost unbearable closeness to the experience of moral injury, yet it also, and this becomes apparent only through comparison with Saadawi, inevitably makes the combatant experience the centre of the experience at the cost of the civilian populations. The Vietnamese dead in the text by O'Brien are an object of guilt of the narrator but not a subject of their testimony. They suffer in the text only to the extent that it is imprinted in the consciousness of the American narrator. It is not the failure of O Briens art, it is, perhaps, a truthful confrontation with the constraints of cross-cultural empathy, but it is a structural constraint that ends up being epistemologically important when the individualised mode is adopted, as it usually is in Western literary studies, as the paradigmatic form of war trauma narration.

5.2 The Grotesque and Collective Accountability in Saadawi

The nature of violence that Saadawi uses is radically different in nature and moral orientation as compared to that of O Brien. Where O Brien lyricises the single acts of violence, Saadawi uses the grotesque, a move that does not defamiliarise violence, but corporeal horror and dark absurdity. The main trick of the story, a monster made from the body parts of bombing victims, turns the image of violence as an act of a single person and an agent into the image of devastation as a system and a collective. The Whatsitsname is not victimized by one individual; it is the sum of an entire ecology of violence: car bombs, sectarian militias, military actions, criminal activities and the attrition of occupation. The fact that its body is sewn together out of the remains of various people, Sunni, Shia, Kurdish, Christian, reflects the randomness of the violence that has engulfed Baghdad.

This monstrous personage has a certain moral purpose which answers the question which Scarry (1985) sees as the inherent problem of depicting pain: the disposition of language to either fail in the presence of intense agony or to assimilate that agony to its own end. The third option presented by Saadawi is that of her creature, which literalises the metaphor of the body politic in such a manner that the accrued violence becomes visible without being domesticated into the familiar narrative patterns. The monster is a witness--it bears witness--but its witness is wavering, self-contradictory, and ultimately self-destructive, it cannot be incorporated into the narrative unity that would enable its violence to be integrated into a redemptive narrative. In this respect, the grotesque body reinvents the

language that violence unmakes (as Scarry calls it) but on a provisional, temporary, and provisional basis and without the false promise of wholeness.

The moral obligation of the collective responsibility over the personal guilt of the novel is a direct opposition to the Western paradigm of trauma narration that O'Brien embodies. The moral architecture in the text by O'Brien is comparatively readable: the narrator is aware of who fired the trigger, and his guilt is his own. Violence in Saadawi Baghdad is so widespread, so multi-authored, that personal responsibility has been lost. The revengeful killing spree of the creature first seems to be a form of justice, it is avenging those who killed the people whose body parts it is but soon turns out to be a never-ending cycle: every retribution needs new body parts, which creates new violence. The reasoning is circular and self-devouring, a formal performance of what LaCapra (2001) refers to as acting out on a collective scale: a society that is stuck in the repetitive cycles of violence with no chance of working through. However, as this article suggests, the collective acting out of Saadawi is qualitatively different than the individual one of O'Brien: it is not the compulsion of a single traumatised consciousness but the systemic trapping of a whole community in structures of violence that cannot be understood or resisted by an individual.

The moral consequences are not just allegorical. By denying the individualisation of perpetrators or victims, the novel demands some kind of collective moral accounting that does not accept the dichotomies of hero and villain, innocent and guilty. It is not moral relativism, but an ethical acknowledgment that in a situation of long-term, multiply authored violence, traditional structures of personal moral responsibility are inadequate. The notion of grievability by Butler (2009) helps to see what is at stake: the novel by Saadawi insists on the fact that each body part that constitutes the creature is a life that was grievable, a death that needs to be recognized, no matter what sect, ethnicity, or political affiliation belonged to the person whose body it was. The animal, according to Butler, is a figure of universal grievability who has been put together out of the pieces of life that the logics of war and sectarianism had made differentially disposable.

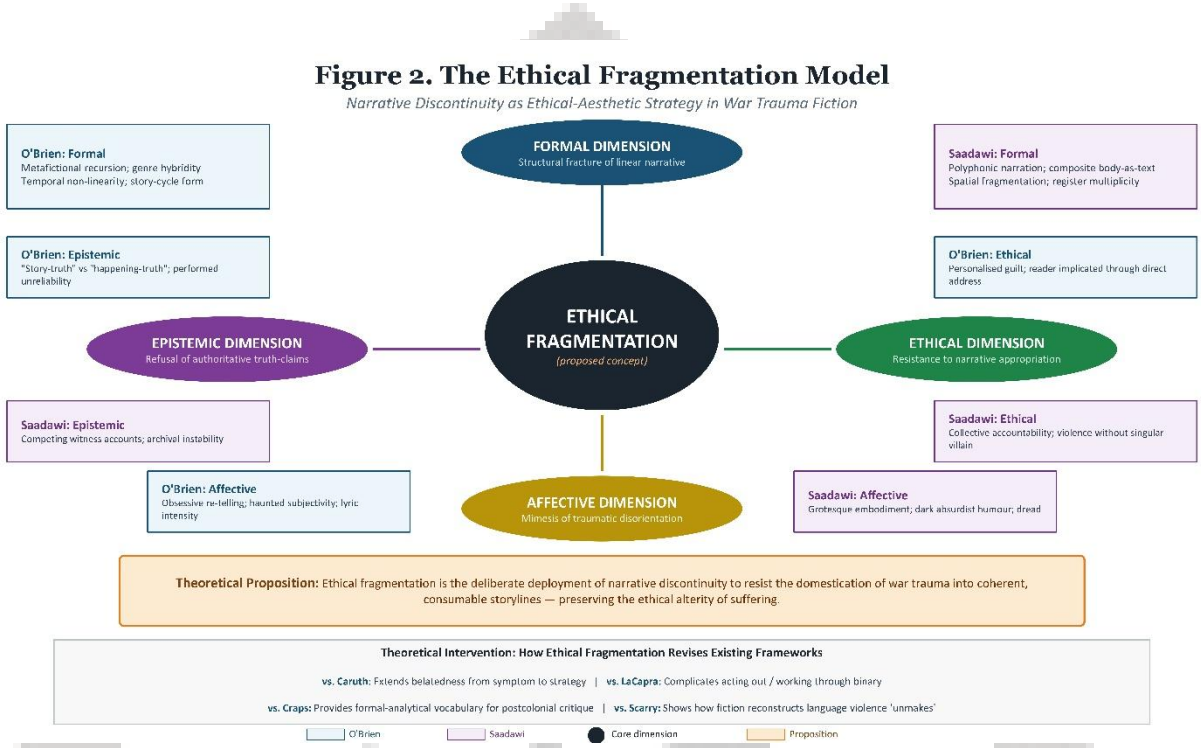

Figure 2. The Ethical Fragmentation Model: Narrative Discontinuity as Ethical-Aesthetic Strategy in War Trauma Fiction. This figure presents the four-dimensional model of ethical fragmentation proposed in this article (formal, epistemic, ethical, affective), showing how each dimension manifests differently in O'Brien's and Saadawi's texts while converging on the shared theoretical proposition that deliberate narrative discontinuity resists the domestication of trauma. The lower panel specifies how ethical fragmentation revises and extends existing frameworks (Caruth, LaCapra, Craps, Scarry), making the concept's theoretical intervention explicit.

Figure 2 visualises the four-dimensional architecture of ethical fragmentation. The model demonstrates that while O'Brien and Saadawi manifest fragmentation through different strategies, metafictional recursion versus polyphonic dispersal, performed unreliability versus archival instability, personalised guilt versus distributed complicity, obsessive retelling versus grotesque embodiment both converge on the central theoretical principle: that deliberate narrative discontinuity constitutes a necessary ethical response to the irreducibility of war trauma. The lower panel of the figure makes explicit how ethical fragmentation revises existing theoretical frameworks: extending Caruth's belatedness from symptom to strategy, complicating LaCapra's binary with an interstitial collective mode, providing the formal-analytical vocabulary Craps calls for, and showing how fiction reconstructs the language that violence unmakes in Scarry's account.

6. Comparative Discussion: Individual and Collective Modalities

The preceding analyses have traced the specific strategies of ethical fragmentation in each text. This section develops the comparison along three axes, emphasising the dialogic rather than merely

parallel relationship between the two works: the distribution of narrative agency, the relationship between trauma and temporality, and the ethics of closure.

6.1 The Distribution of Narrative Agency

Narrative agency in the text by O Brien is vested in the soldier-narrator- a first-person voice that dominates, rewrites and reinvents the traumatic past. The narration of the story of other characters is filtered by the consciousness of the narrator even in cases when other characters are recounted. Such a focus creates a story that is highly personal yet necessarily narrow in its focus: the Vietnam War is perceived as a crisis of personal conscience. Narrative agency in Saadawi is radically dispersed in her novel. There is no one character who oversees the story; the Whatsitsname creature, which is supposed to be the main character, is a composite being made of and animated by the deaths of numerous people. Even the frame narrative of the novel, a government security report that is a compilation of different testimonies, highlights the artificial, mediated and partial nature of the narrative.

The dialogic meaning of this deviation is two-fold. First, the polyphonic mode that Saadawi adopts reveals the extent to which O Briens individualised narration, despite all its formal novelty, is engaged in a Western literary tradition that identifies meaning, agency, and moral authority in the autonomous individual subject, the Cartesian cogito, the existentialist hero. It is not a weakness of the text of O'Brien to this extent as a cultural formation that can only be seen as such when juxtaposed to a non-Western alternative. Second, the psychological intensity of O'Brien shows what the collective mode of Saadawi loses, the prolonged involvement in the moral struggle of a single consciousness that generates the phenomenal affective power of chapters such as The Man I (Maybe) Killed and Speaking of Courage. The democratic sharing of narrative power that Saadawi has done is ethically commendable and formally dispersive; no single character in Frankenstein in Baghdad attains the psychological depth of the narrator in Oedipus, and this is not a vice but a formal result of the various ethical commitments of the collective modality.

This reciprocity of light implies that the decision between the individual and collective modalities of narrating trauma is not simply a matter of taste but an ethically significant structural choice, which has actual epistemic implications. The Western individualised mode offers psychological richness and moral closeness at the expense of making the combatant experience central; the collective mode offers epistemic richness and social responsibility at the expense of affective focus. Both models are not sufficient on their own, as each reveals the blind spots of the other. This type of

productive, non-hierarchical comparison can only be achieved through the concept of ethical fragmentation, which offers a common analytical framework that can be used to accommodate both modalities without reducing one to the other.

6.2 Trauma and Temporality

The two readings differ greatly in how they address the correlation between trauma and time, which also sheds more light on the weaknesses of the current theory of trauma. The narrative of O'Brien is written in a recursive way: the narrator constantly comes back to the same events, re-examining them in new perspectives, correcting previous versions. The traumatic past is lived as a present that is eternal. This time frame coincides with the model of belatedness introduced by Caruth (1996), where the traumatic experience comes back since it was not experienced completely at that time. The narrator is behaving out in the sense of LaCapra: he cannot achieve the critical distance that would allow him to work through.

The temporality of Saadawi is different. The novel is in a condensed historical time, 2005 Baghdad, a time of increasing sectarian violence, and is presented in something like chronological sequence, interspersed with analeptic fragments. But the time experience is not the return of time but the accumulation of violence: it is not that violence returns; it is multiplied. Every new bombing is an addition that does not give room to process the previous ones. When the temporality of O'Brien is spiral, in the sense of returning to the same things, that of Saadawi is tidal, a continuous forward rush that leaves the possibility of reflection behind.

This distinction reveals a major weakness in the underlying model by Caruth. Caruth assumes that the traumatic experience is over-that there is a temporal gap between the initial experience and its re-experience in memory. In Baghdad of Saadawi, however, the traumatic phenomenon is not over; the bloodshed is not over yet, and the problem of narration is not the late appearance of the past but the simultaneity of the present disaster. It is the temporality that Craps (2013) and Das (2007) have described as the feature of trauma in the Global South not the single, closed event with the subsequent delayed coming back (the model that fits the experience of the veteran in the West), but the ongoing, structural, open-ended violence that is the daily life of millions of people residing in the conflict zones. The comparison of O'Brien and Saadawi, therefore, shows that the Caruthian model, although enlightening in the retrospective narratives of trauma, needs a lot of expansion to explain the current narration of violence.

6.3 The Ethics of Closure

The major convergence, perhaps, is in the common rejection of narrative resolution. The end of O Briens collection is not reconciliation but the understanding of the narrator that storytelling is a survival mechanism of keeping the dead alive without making it look like their deaths are redeemed. The last chapter, which is called The Lives of the Dead, does not end the previous crises but adds them to a continuous and open-ended mourning process. The novel by Saadawi is also unwilling to end itself: the Whatsitsname being falls apart as its parts are rotting away, the Final Report in which the novel is framed is clearly insufficient. The novel is non-closing as the violence it indicates has not taken its leave; to give the resolution would erroneously depict the current reality of Iraqi civilian sufferings.

The two texts put the reader not in the position of passive consumer but as an active ethical participant. O'Brien does so with direct address and metafictional provocation, Saadawi by the sheer accumulation of the violence that overloads the reader with their emotional processing abilities. In both instances indifference to closure is also indifference to the innocence of the reader: to read carefully is to be involved in the moral issues that such texts pose concerning the connection between narrative, memory and the continuing effects of political violence. This intersection, despite the numerous disparities, is an indication of the possibility of a comparative poetics of war that cut across cultural borders without being blind to the modalities, particular to its own culture, in which the trauma is experienced and disclosed.

6.4 Toward a Global Comparative Poetics of War Trauma

The comparative analysis leads to the fact that the need to create a comparatively global comparative poetics of narration of war trauma appears. This poetics would then have to consider the unequal distribution of power that determines the production, circulation, and reception of war literature: American war discourse is translated, taught and canonised around the world where Iraqi war fiction continues to remain relatively marginal. A comparative poetics sensitive to such asymmetries would not bring equivalence into being between radically different experiences of violence but would clarify how literature form addresses and/or challenges the hierarchies of politics that define who have suffered, whose voice is listened to, whose loss is taken into memory.

Such poetics has one contribution in ethical fragmentation. The concept offers a comparative analytical framework that is neither universalising nor relativistic in that it identifies the disruption of narrative coherence as a common ethical strategy in culturally diverse war narratives and pays attention

to the modalities through which that disruption is realised. It recognizes that the official problem of the narration of war trauma is, on one level, common: any war story must contest the dilemma of the necessity to witness and the inability of proper representation. It nonetheless claims that the form of this challenge is highly dependent on the cultural, historical, and political conditions under which trauma is lived and told.

Figure 3. The Memory–Violence–Representation Nexus

A Triadic Analytical Model for Comparative War Trauma Narration

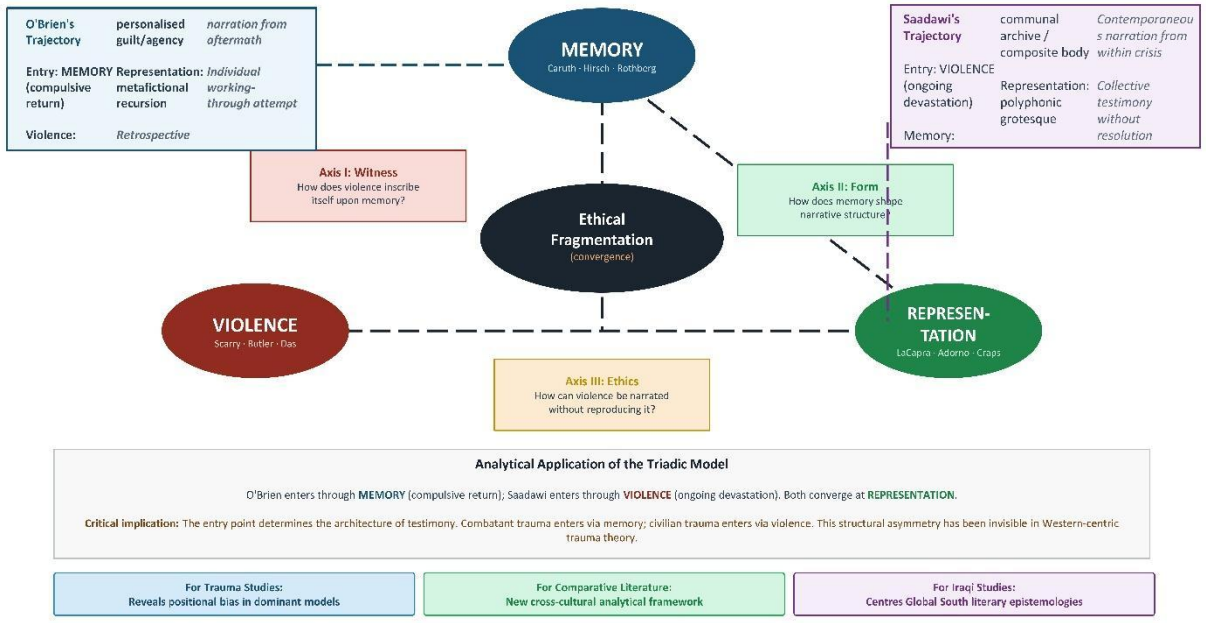

Figure 3. The Memory–Violence–Representation Nexus: A Triadic Analytical Model for Comparative War Trauma Narration. This model proposes that memory, violence, and representation constitute the three vertices of a dynamic analytical field, connected by three axes (Witness, Form, Ethics). The model's critical contribution is demonstrating that each text enters the nexus from a different vertex O'Brien through memory (retrospective compulsion), Saadawi through violence (ongoing crisis) producing different architectures of testimony that converge at ethical fragmentation. The lower panel specifies the model's implications for trauma studies, comparative literature, and Iraqi literary scholarship.

Figure 3 synthesises the comparative findings in a triadic analytical model. The Memory–Violence–Representation Nexus maps the different entry points through which each text engages the field of trauma narration. O'Brien's text is memory-driven, structured by the narrator's compulsive return to past violence; Saadawi's is violence-driven, structured by the relentless forward momentum of ongoing devastation. Both trajectories converge at representation, where ethical fragmentation emerges as the shared yet differently manifested formal strategy. The model's critical implication is that the entry point determines the architecture of testimony, and that combatant trauma enters via

memory while civilian traumas enter via violence identifies a structural asymmetry that has been largely invisible in Western-centric trauma theory. This asymmetry is not merely thematic but epistemic: it determines what kinds of knowledge, what forms of testimony, and what structures of narrative are available to each text.

7. Conclusion

This paper has compared the concerns of the text of Ahmed Saadawi in Frankenstein in Baghdad and The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien in matters of war trauma narration based on the strategies of memory, violence, and narrative fragmentation. The review has shown some convergence and divergences that are not only different cultural practices but also radically different epistemic standpoints where war trauma is felt and told.

The main theoretical input was the suggestion of the concept of ethical fragmentation as a tool in the interpretation of how mass violence can be represented in war fiction using narrative discontinuity as a formal and ethical tool. Formulated on four dimensions (formal, epistemic, ethical and affective) of ethical fragmentation has supplied a framework that is developed in a number of ways further than the available models: it conceptualizes the partial as being a strategy, not a symptom (building on Caruth); it is able to accommodate both group and individual modalities (building on LaCapra); it attempts to develop how fiction can recreate the language that violence has destroyed (building on Scarry). The comparative application has shown that even though both authors use ethical fragmentation, they apply it in different modalities the individualised metafictional recursion and collective polyphonic dispersal which are a manifestation of the asymmetry of combatant and civilian subject positions.

The dialogic reading formed here has produced the revelations that would not be possible when each of the texts is studied separately. The collective modality of Saadawi reveals the epistemological constraints of the individualised Western narrative of trauma: its inescapable centrism on the combatant, the belief that narrative is sovereign, and that it originates out of a single consciousness to become the focal point of meaning. The psychological vehemence of O'Brien, on the contrary, shows us the affective price of polyphonic dispersal: of the renunciation of long-term interaction with the moral conflict of any one consciousness. The one is indispensable to the other, which does not mean that we cannot see one without the other. This model of Memory Violence Representation Nexus

suggested in this article offers a framework of future comparative analyses that is sensitive to these structural asymmetries.

This paper makes three contributions to the existing body of scholarship. In the case of trauma research, it illustrates that the prevailing models, which are mostly formulated in the context of isolated major disasters and the individual psychic reaction of the victims, need massive expansion to explain the continuous, group-based, and structurally generated trauma that defines conflict in the Global South, and it gives the formal-analytical instruments of that expansion. To comparative literature it provides an anti-hierarchical structure of reading war stories across cultural and positional boundaries, an anti-universalising type of structure that denies the difference and an anti-relativistic type of structure that denies comparison. To the scholarship of Iraqi and Middle Eastern literature, it has the argument that Frankenstein in Baghdad is not a political allegory or a dark satire and a significant accomplishment of literary art, requiring and rewarding the same level of theoretical interest, the same attention to formal complexities, and the same moral attentiveness that the world scholarly community has long shown canonical Western war fiction.

Further studies could consider using this framework to other pairs of war trauma texts: Iraqi fiction and Afghanistan, Syria, or Palestinian war writing; Vietnamese voices and American voices; the civilian literature of Yemen, South Sudan, or eastern Congo and the combatant literature of the intervening countries. This would add to the ongoing project of creating veritable global poetics of war trauma, one that respects the particularity of the experience of violence of the specific community whilst at the same time acknowledging the necessity of humans to tell, to remember, and to witness to that which must not be forgotten.

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