

Article

Liminality, Madness, and Narration in Hassan Blasim's "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" and "Why Don't You Write a Novel Instead of Talking about All These Characters?"

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Abstract: The fiction of Hassan Blasim addresses the horrors of contemporary Iraq and centers on the crisis of identity that is part of the immigrant's experience. Blasim's protagonists try to forget past traumas related to their homeland by developing new identities ingrained solely in the present. Yet, the past resurfaces in the form of nightmarish dreams, madness, and fractured narratives where fiction and reality intersect and overlap. Inhabiting a constant state of liminality imprints itself on the body and psyche of the border crossers and leads to their physical or mental demise. Drawing on theories of madness, liminality, and narration advanced by Shoshana Felman and Michel Foucault, I analyze Blasim's two short stories "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" and "Why Don't You Write a Novel Instead of Talking About All These Characters?" I argue that the imaginative space of literary narration, an in-between, liminal space between reality and fiction, is the space where ethico-political paradoxes and the absurdity of real-life trauma, death, and chaos are transformed into a meaningful literary dialogue that can expand reality and offer new spheres of understanding of the trauma that shapes the lives of Blasim's characters.

Keywords: liminality; madness; narration; Hassan Blasim; Iraqi literature; refugees



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1. Introduction

On the aesthetics of horror in Iraqi narratives of war, Haytham Bahooora comments, "Literary recourse to the metaphysical, whether through the subconscious, nightmares, or the supernatural, are frequent stylistic conventions of post-2003 Iraqi literary production, narrating a terrain of unspeakable violence and its many afterlives" (Bahooora 2015, p. 185). Iraqi author and filmmaker Hassan Blasim's short stories portray Iraqi men and women who suffer various forms of trauma resulting from what Bahooora calls the "unspeakable violence" that plagued Iraq during, between, and after the first and second Gulf Wars. These atrocities have only intensified after the United States-led invasion in 2003 and the ensuing occupation and civil war that have destroyed the country's infrastructure and economy, as well as its social and cultural fabric. These tragedies have left the Iraqi people traumatized and impoverished, sending waves of refugees from their homeland seeking safety in neighboring countries, in Europe, and beyond. In the literary sphere, displacement, violence, and trauma have become dominant subject matters for many Iraqi authors inside and outside of Iraq. The scale of catastrophe has influenced many Iraqi authors' approaches to writing, and they have needed new aesthetic modes to narrate the experiences of personal and collective trauma. As Bahooora puts it, "The nightmare scenarios they narrate rely on a literary experimentalism that departs from narrative realism by constructing fantastic narratives of horror that abandon any pretense of representing reality . . ." (Bahooora 2015, p. 188).

Writer and filmmaker Hassan Blasim is one of many Iraqi artists whose works are heavily influenced by their experiences as refugees and immigrants. Born in Baghdad in 1973, he fled to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1988 to escape persecution under Saddam Hussein's rule.

He then immigrated to Finland in 2004, where he currently resides as a naturalized citizen. His acclaimed debut collection *The Madman of Freedom Square* was published in translation in 2009 before it appeared in Arabic as *Majnūn Sāhat Al-hurriyah* (مجنون ساحة الحرية) in 2012.

The Arabic version was immediately banned in Jordan.¹ A second collection of Blasim's short stories, *The Iraqi Christ*, was published in English translation in 2013 and won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014. Blasim is the first Arab writer to win this prestigious award. Selections from *The Madman of Freedom Square* and *The Iraqi Christ* were subsequently published as part of a collection entitled *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* in 2014. As noted by Qussay Al-Attabi, "Blasim is more widely read outside of Iraq than inside the country, and his stories enjoy better readership in English than they do in Arabic."² This speaks to the nature of Blasim's fiction as being preoccupied with the farcical and macabre depiction of the operation of power and with the taboo themes of death, sex, and religion. The stories abound in black humor and scenes of sex and drunkenness that are presented in a crude, uncensored language.

Blasim's short stories are about violence, loss, and trauma presented within elements of the macabre, the fantastical, and the grotesque. They illustrate the mental and emotional impacts of ongoing wars and destruction on the Iraqi populace. Blasim's characters are undermined by experiences of violence, death, and chaos, which leave them lacking direction and meaning. Faced with grotesque situations, they have no choice but to flee if they want to survive the violence, death, and hardships of their homeland, thereby making border crossing a recurring theme in Blasim's short stories. But even the characters who manage to physically escape Iraq carry with them the residues of their traumatic past, which creates an identity crisis that haunts them in their new adopted homes.

Khaled Al-Masri employs the term "contamination" to describe how the experience of border crossing leaves its mark on the body and psyche of the Iraqi refugees and often leads to their demise in the form of madness or death. Al-Masri argues that these characters try to suppress their Iraqi-ness when they move to Europe, signaling an attempt to forget the traumatic experiences associated with Iraq, which is, by now, a bygone time and place. Yet, the traumatic past resurfaces to "contaminate" the present of the refugee or migrant, mainly because they are condemned to dwell in "diasporic spaces" of liminality.³ As these refugees and migrants attempt to find happiness in a new environment, they are physically and psychologically destined to inhabit an indefinite state of liminality. Instead of the border being a penetrable place, Blasim shows it to be an inescapable, in-between, temporo-spatial entity where characters grapple with their fractured subjectivities. Unable to cross the border, the refugee figuratively becomes the border.

Critics have noted Blasim's indebtedness to the ancient fantastic tradition of Arabic writing, such as the *Arabian Nights*, and to the magical realism of Latin America, especially the works of Borges and Roberto Bolaño, which likewise struggle "with contesting cultures, political violence and overbearing religion," as pointed out by Robin Yassin-Kassab.⁴ In addition to Kafkaesque premises, scholars have repeatedly situated Blasim's fiction within the postcolonial gothic tradition that has flourished in Iraq since 2003. This form of writing that re-emerges with particular force during times of crisis and chaos "serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form," (Masmoudi 2019, p. 67) as noted by Ikram Masmoudi in her analysis of the gothic poetics in Hassan Blasim's Fiction.

The prevalence of violence, chaos, madness, and death is the most salient feature displayed in Blasim's short narrative fiction and constitutes the main focus of scholarly engagement with Blasim's body of work. For Shang Biwu, Blasim's short stories create "impossible storyworlds of terror," an unnatural narrative technique of boundary crossing between real and fictional worlds that challenges the reader's cognition. This technique of defamiliarization aims to raise our common concern for human suffering.⁵ Al-Attabi mentions that Blasim's masterful use of mayhem to tell meaningful stories only makes sense if one accepts the normalcy of violence and chaos, which is what glues the stories together.⁶

As Sarah Anderson concludes in *Readings of Trauma, Madness, and the Body*, “contemporary trauma fiction has at its foundation the intention of transmitting the trauma of its characters to readers,” (Anderson 2012, p. 67) bringing attention to the political, social, and cultural oppression that caused it. This is a view echoed by Bahooora, who states in his analyses of the aesthetics of horror in Iraqi narratives of war that the inconclusiveness, confusion, and ambiguousness of the postcolonial gothic gestures toward “the unsolvable nature of political and historical conflicts.” Yet, despite these “unspeakable horrors,” the story “must still be spoken” (Bahooora 2015, p. 201).

Blasim, however, uses the term “nightmare realism” to describe his short fiction: “they say to me, for example, ‘Your style is magical realist like Marquez.’ And I say: ‘No, I write nightmare realism.’”⁷ In another interview, Blasim derides what sounds like an elitist, carefree approach to such literature whose subject matter revolves around ubiquitous violence and in which the horrors of reality surpass that of fiction: “The story ‘Song of The Goats’ makes fun of attempts to talk about the style of a story or of language in a world of madness and barbarity. They talk about the beauty of language and the poetic quality of sentences, while people in Iraq were being slaughtered every day.”⁸

In order to enter and examine this realm of nightmares and death, this paper argues that the key lies in the imaginative space of literary narration, specifically in the border crossings experienced by Blasim’s characters in the selected texts analyzed. This literal liminal space offers the possibility of a metaphorical/psychological crossing experience where the meaninglessness of death, violence, and madness can be transformed into a meaningful literary dialogue that can expand the limitations of our perception of reality and transcend the nightmares of the present. It is with this purpose in mind that I use the scholarly work of Shoshana Felman and Michel Foucault, whose theoretical approaches discuss in-betweenness as a meeting point. For example, Felman talks about the imaginative space of literary narration as a point of contact where the impossibility of changing the past meets the possibility of hope in the future. Moreover, Foucault discusses “heterotopic” spaces as in-between zones of reflection and mediation. This paper takes these ideas and applies them to Blasim’s stories of nightmares and fragmentation to provide insight into circumstances that rational thinking can no longer comprehend, thereby demonstrating that this unique narrative technique of blurring the borders between reality and fiction and sanity and madness can drive us into new spheres of understanding of the trauma that shapes the lives of Blasim’s characters.

In “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” and “Why Don’t You Write a Novel Instead of Talking About All These Characters?” Blasim’s protagonists are Iraqi immigrants who want to forget about the experience of border crossing and Iraq, a time and place defined by trauma, violence, and death, and forge new identities rooted in their recently adopted homes as European citizens. Border crossing, however, imprints itself on the psyche of both protagonists and manifests itself as an identity crisis. It prevents them from developing a healthy and sane relationship with their present time and place. In both stories, the protagonists are trapped at a borderline where the boundaries between sanity and insanity, conscious and unconscious, and reality and fiction are indistinguishable. Blasim’s use of nightmarish dreams, fractured narratives, and experimental techniques make the case for the use of writing and narration as an imagined, liminal space, beyond a bordered, insulated vision of territoriality, life, and truth. This literary space of liminality, what I also call the imaginative space of narrative formation, is the real space of argumentation where ethico-political paradoxes of human suffering are invoked, transforming absurd real-life trauma, fragmentation, and death into a meaningful literary dialogue.

2. Deadly Borders

“The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes,” from the collection *The Madman of Freedom Square*, tells the story of Salim Abdul Husain, who becomes Carlos Fuentes upon his arrival in Europe. When he is still in Baghdad, Salim has a municipal job cleaning up after the explosions caused by suicide bombers and car bombs. On one of his workdays, Salim is

sweeping the street after a petrol tanker exploded and incinerated animals, vegetables, and human beings. Similar to every miserable workday, Salim is bored and disgusted. Searching among the rubble and the dead for valuables, Salim is not as lucky as his colleagues. He needs money to buy a visa to go to Holland and “escape this hell of fire and death” (Blasim 2009, p. 75). His only lucky find on this day is a man’s finger with a ring on it. He keeps the ring for himself, ignoring the finger. Forgoing any details of border crossing, the narrator informs the reader that, upon his arrival in Holland, Salim applies for asylum and changes his name from Salim Abdul Husain to Carlos Fuentes. Happy with his new name and life, Salim relinquishes all the material and non-material possessions of his old life when he moves to Europe, except for the ring. The narrator asks, “Might one say he felt a secret spiritual relationship to the ring?” (Blasim 2009, p. 76). Indeed, the ring symbolizes the permanent relationship to Iraq.

In his new adopted home, Salim immerses himself fully in the Dutch culture—learning Dutch, marrying a Dutch woman, getting a job, paying taxes, and adopting local customs: “Every day he made progress in burying his identity and past” (Blasim 2009, p. 77). Everything Carlos Fuentes sees amazes him and humiliates him at the same time when he compares it to the state of affairs in his home country. Dutch people are civilized and peaceful. Everything in Holland is green, clean, and beautiful. Salim wants to identify himself as Carlos Fuentes because he wants to distance himself from the “misery, backwardness, death, shit, piss and camels” of the Arab world, describing the Iraqi people as “uncivilized, backward and savage clans” (Blasim 2009, p. 78). Salim highlights the racist presumptions he has internalized as well as the racism he expects to face if he identifies as Arab. He wants to claim an insider position in this context where he is an outsider. Salim/Carlos derides other immigrants and foreigners who “do not respect the rules of Dutch life” (Blasim 2009, p. 77), by working under the table, not paying taxes, and breaking the law. He calls them “Stone Age savages” who hate the Dutch “who have fed and housed them” (Blasim 2009, p. 77). By contrast: “He felt he was the only one who deserved to be adopted by this compassionate and tolerant country, and that the Dutch government should expel all those who do not learn the language properly and anyone who committed the slightest misdemeanor” (Blasim 2009, p. 77).

Salim/Carlos “felt that his skin and blood had changed forever and that his lungs were now breathing real life” (Blasim 2009, p. 78). Indeed, the protagonist’s quest to leave behind his Iraqi identity and remake himself into a legitimate European citizen seems to have been successful until he begins having nightmares. In one dream, he loses the ability to speak Dutch. In another, he finds himself on trial for planting a car bomb in Amsterdam, facing a judge who forces him to defend himself in Arabic. In a third dream, Salim/Carlos finds himself back in Iraq, in the district where he was born, where children are making fun of his new name: “Carlos the coward, Carlos the sissy, Carlos the silly billy” (Blasim 2009, p. 78).

In an effort to stop the nightmares, Salim/Carlos modifies his daily behavior in extreme ways: changing his diet, his clothes, and his habits. The obsessive and eccentric practices and routines he adopts take over his life. Ultimately, Salim/Carlos comes to believe that the only solution is to dream like a Dutchman, thus exposing his unconscious mind to the same cultural cleansing he has applied to his conscious mind. To free himself from these nightmares, he reasons, “the dreams must learn the new language of the country so they could incorporate new images and ideas” (Blasim 2009, p. 78). However, Salim/Carlos is unsuccessful. In the end, Carlos Fuentes and Salim Abdul Husain come face to face in a nightmare. When Carlos Fuentes realizes he is dreaming, he attempts to “activate his conscious mind inside the dream so that he can sweep out all the rubbish of the unconscious” (Blasim 2009, p. 78). The only way to resolve the psychological anxiety of Carlos Fuentes is to kill Salim Abdul Husain. When Carlos Fuentes confronts Salim in the dream, he is naked and holding a bloody broom. Salim’s nakedness suggests that his Iraqi-ness is integral to his core self, in contrast to his Dutch and Mexican identities, which are chosen and removable, such as clothing. This is evident when Salim begins provoking

Carlos Fuentes by chanting: “Salim the Dutchman, Salim the Mexican, Salim the Iraqi, Salim the Frenchman, Salim the Indian, Salim the Pakistani, Salim the Nigerian” (Blasim 2009, p. 82). Carlos Fuentes begins to shoot at him, but Salim Abdul Husain jumps out of the window, escaping the bullets but maybe falling to his death. The death of Salim Abdul Husain must also result in the death of Carlos Fuentes because they are the same person. Outside of the nightmare, Salim/Carlos jumps out of the window, falling to his death. His body is splayed on the pavement. After it is covered, all that stays visible of him after his death is the finger that is still wearing the ring, the remnant and reminder of his Iraqi identity.

Why was he unable to sever his final tie to Iraq, this link between past and present? Like a wedding band, the ring is a symbol of eternal commitment guaranteeing that he will always be Salim, the Iraqi immigrant to the Netherlands, where he unsuccessfully tried to become Carlos Fuentes. Furthermore, after Salim/Carlos’s death, his Iraqi identity is privileged over the Dutch one. The Dutch newspaper reporting his death describes him as an “Iraqi man” rather than a “Dutch national.” His brothers take his body back to Iraq and bury him in Najaf. Unable to reconcile past and present, troubled by his history and trauma, Salim/Carlos is left suspended between two identities, spaces, and times. He is hanging in a permanent state of liminality. Figuratively, Salim/Carlos is stuck in this borderline space. The suppressed shame and trauma related to his Iraqi identity infect his present, rendering him unable to forge a coherent narrative for his present and future. Salim/Carlos’s nightmares symbolize the conflict between the borderlines of past and present, Iraq and Holland, Salim and Carlos, and the conscious and the unconscious. The conflict arises from trying to efface one and suppress it over the other instead of reconciling both by acknowledging their presence and coexistence in the same person.

While Blasim presents the adoption of the name Carlos Fuentes as a random choice, the invocation of a Mexican author’s name is significant. Salim justifies his request for asylum as well as his name change on the grounds that he once worked as a translator for the US forces, an occupation that would brand him as a traitor in the eyes of “fanatical Islamist groups” who would assassinate him” (Blasim 2009, p. 76). In reality, however, Salim wants to have a Western name to initiate his transformation from an Iraqi to a Dutch citizen, and because he feels it is better not to “have an Arab name in Europe” (Blasim 2009, p. 76). The name Carlos Fuentes is suggested to Salim by his cousin who lives in France and who comes across the name in a literary article; he supposes that a brown name would suit Salim’s complexion, “Which is the color of burnt barley bread” (Blasim 2009, p. 76).

Blasim invokes the name of Carlos Fuentes by drawing a comparison between his own characters and those of this writer who has written about the experiences of Mexican refugees in the United States. This speaks to a growing trend in modern Arabic literature of exile and migration that has been shifting away from earlier postcolonial discourses on East/West encounters to discuss exile and migration as a transnational, global phenomenon. In the words of Johanna Sellman, “This more recent writing grapples with subjectivities born of mass migration and encounters with borderlands . . . and explores spaces located outside citizenship” (Sellman 2018, p. 751). Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012), who is a renowned Mexican author, has earned international acclaim through his experimental novels and short stories. It is evident that Blasim shares a stylistic and thematic literary affiliation with Fuentes: they both have an experimental writing style and write about the atrocities causing their fellow countrymen to flee their homelands. Blasim injects a realistic dimension into his fictional story, thereby adding another layer of liminality.

Of particular interest is the short story “The Line of Oblivion” from Fuentes’s *The Crystal Frontier*, published in Spanish in 1995 and in English translation in 1997. Described as “A Novel in Nine Stories,” *The Crystal Frontier* is organized around the theme of border crossing at the US–Mexico border and around the life of Mexican migrants in the US. “The Line of Oblivion” tells the story of an old, unnamed man who finds himself abandoned in the dark at an unidentified place, which turns out later in the story to be the US–Mexico border. He is left in a wheelchair, unable to move or remember what his name is and what

brought him to this current place of complete darkness. The only object he can discern is a line at his feet: "A luminous stripe painted a phosphorescent color. A line. A boundary. A painted stripe. It shines in the night. It's the only thing shining" (Fuentes 1997, p. 90). He wonders what this line might be, what it separates, and what it divides: "I have nothing but this line to orient me" (Fuentes 1997, p. 90). But, soon, the line, the only shining object in this darkness that appears to be giving this abandoned and paralyzed man a sense of orientation, quickly becomes a source of more confusion. He figures that the line must be artificial because the earth has no lines; this line divides the earth, but the earth is not divided. He recognizes that the earth has no boundaries, that this line makes the earth into something else, and that it transforms the earth, once a unified and beautiful landscape of rivers, gorges, and deserts, into contested territories and lands. In this same way, one can see how this line transforms him from a human being, once loved by the world, into an abandoned person whose legal status and, consequently, humanity are questioned and disputed.

The old man, thrown into oblivion by the line at his feet, struggles to remember his name. He starts wondering if he is dead or alive as this line becomes "The vague intermediate zone between his life and death" (Fuentes 1997, p. 107). Eventually, dawn breaks, and the unidentified old man can see the movement that takes place at the frontier where everyone crosses the line, some in fear, some in joy" (Fuentes 1997, p. 110). This movement triggers some of the old man's memories. These vague and incoherent memories resemble dreams, or, more precisely, the nightmares in Blasim's story. These sad remembrances inform the reader that the old man was abandoned by his American-born children because his name has become a curse and an embarrassment to them. They left him at the border without identification hoping that someone might take pity on him and take him in. His political activism in defense of Mexican refugees has sullied his name, and his children blame him for becoming a source of shame for the family. They accuse him of being ungrateful to the US, the country to which they belong. Similar to Salim/Carlos, the protagonist's children want him to fully embrace his American identity and distance himself and them from their Mexican one. Like Salim/Carlos, these American-born children consider their Mexican homeland to be a place of corruption, injustice, and poverty, a place that is fundamentally deficient. By extension, they are humiliated by their connection to Mexico. They want to get rid of their father in order to sever their connection to Mexico and solely embrace their American identity.

In the words of the old man, the line is a trap "to keep the earth from being earth and from receiving me" (Fuentes 1997, p. 93). The earth should be a home, a place of comfort and rest for its inhabitants. But this line transforms the earth into a trap and prevents it from receiving and welcoming its own children. "I am so alone. I'm so cold. I feel so abandoned" (Fuentes 1997, p. 92). The line proves to be impenetrable, and it is inscribed onto the life and psyche of the border crosser as a trap symbolizing the world's rejection and abandonment. The story ends when the old man, who is dying at the border from a bullet wound he received from the border police, remembers his name: Emiliano Barroso. Although Emiliano Barroso lived most of his life in the US as a US citizen, he remains trapped at "the line of oblivion." These words that describe the physical and mental state of Fuentes's protagonist echo the universal experience of loss and confusion felt by Blasim's protagonist and by all refugees and immigrants around the world. Additionally, "Barroso" in Spanish means muddy, as in the case of being full of mud from the wet earth. Mud invokes a sense of entrapment. When someone is stuck in the mud, they are unable to move or to free themselves. This is particularly significant in the case of Barroso and Salim/Carlos, who are trapped at a borderline and unable to cross and set themselves free.

Reading "The Line of Oblivion" alongside "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" is especially constructive. Both the Arab name of Salim Abdul Husain and the Mexican name of Emiliano Barroso are considered sources of shame and suspicion in the diasporic context where they live. While Salim Abdul Husain intentionally wants to fully embrace his European identity and efface his Iraqi-ness, Emiliano Barroso's family wants him to

adopt his American identity and completely forget about his Mexican-ness. They consider his open political activism on behalf of Mexican immigrants a source of embarrassment because it connects him and them to their Mexican origins. They accuse their father of being ungrateful to the country that has hosted them in much the same way that Salim Abdul Husain viewed other Iraqi immigrants in the Netherlands. However, at the moment of death, the original identity of both protagonists is restored and wins over the adopted one. Barroso dies as a Mexican immigrant at the US border and Salim Abdul Husain dies as an Iraqi immigrant in the Netherlands.

While Emiliano Barroso's main struggle is to remember his name and to connect to his Mexican identity, Salim/Carlos wants to forget his Iraqi name and identity. Yet, despite this difference, both characters share the same tragic destiny. They both end up dead. Barroso and Salim/Carlos's death is the result of their being stuck at the border, physically in Barroso's case and psychologically in Salim/Carlos's case. Neither was able to penetrate the border. Despite the differences in the place and time of their diasporic contexts, their refugee identities led to their deaths. In other words, the border, which they were unable to cross and which they have essentially become, has killed both Salim Abdul Husain and Emiliano Barroso.

Blasim adds another borderline for his readers by naming his protagonist after a Mexican writer. One cannot read "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" without inquiring about who Carlos Fuentes is: is he really a Mexican author or is he just a fictional character in Blasim's story? It is one more layer of borderline fluidity between real and imaginative worlds. "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes" and "The Line of Oblivion" dwell in the liminal space between reality and fiction, just as Salim/Carlos and Emiliano exist between two identities, between Iraq and the Netherlands/Mexico and the US, and between past and present.

3. Borders and Narratives

Like "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes," "Why Don't You Write a Novel Instead of Talking About All These Characters?" in Blasim's collection *The Iraqi Christ* tells the story of an Iraqi immigrant trying, and ultimately failing, to fully integrate into a diaspora space in Europe. As a result, the protagonist's narrative is fractured by the experience of border crossing and is manifested by blurring the parameters between reality and fiction. In this story, Blasim merges real and fictional spaces of a forest near the Hungarian border, of heterotopic spaces, such as the refugee center, the hospital, the quarantine section, and the cemetery, and of the imaginative realm of narration. The clandestine border crossing experience is transmuted into a parallel literary crossing where the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred and confused.

The story opens with Salem Hussein, an Iraqi refugee, crossing the Romanian–Hungarian border with his friend, Adel Salim. They are carrying the corpse of a half-naked Afghan man who drowned in the icy waters of the river during their attempt to reach Hungary. The three refugees were left behind by a trafficker and separated from the group of refugees with whom they were travelling; or, as Salem states, they were "dead to the world" in a "forest that appeared to be endless, with no way out" (Blasim 2013, p. 91). This sentiment echoes the physical and mental state of Blasim's refugee characters, who are stuck endlessly in a borderline space with no way out. For three "cruel nights," Salem and Adel drag the corpse of the Afghan man. The smell of the dead corpse leads the Hungarian army dogs to where Salem and Adel are resting after they cross the river from Romania into Hungary. Once they are apprehended, they rejoin the rest of the group of refugees, who had been caught by the Hungarian border police three days earlier.

After a quick interrogation at the army post on the border, Salem, Adel, and the other refugees are sent to the refugee center in a border town. At the center, stool and urine samples are collected before they are transferred to the "dirty and crowded" quarantine section. Those whose medical tests come back positive for tuberculosis or scabies are then taken to the "isolation hospital on the outskirts of town" (Blasim 2013, p. 93). The army

post, the quarantine section, and the hospital represent diaspora spaces contaminated by infection, dirt, and disease. In “The More Than Human Refugee Journey: Hassan Blasim’s Short Stories,” Rita Sakr discusses the significance of the discourse of dirt and cleanliness that creates the binary human/non-human dichotomy: “an immunity discourse of dirt and cleanliness determines the parameters of exclusion of both the dehumanized asylum-seeker and the non-human from a bordered community that fears infection” (Sakr 2018, p. 777). Following Sakr’s argument on the “parameters of exclusion,” Salem refers to himself and the other refugees at the center as inmates, which also refers to a person who is kept in a prison or a hospital for people who are mentally ill, thereby reflecting that a clandestine migrant’s mobility is criminalized. The refugee center is, in fact, a heterotopic space of isolation, detention, and confinement in a Foucauldian sense. It is “dirty and crowded,” as described by Salem, set at the periphery in order to separate, using Sakr’s dichotomy, the European human from the non-human refugee.

As per Foucault, heterotopic sites simultaneously reflect and contest the spaces we share. Modern heterotopias, or “counter-sites,” exist outside of the ordinary to reflect a separation from or some form of deviation. Foucault gives the rest home as an example—a place for the non-productive, for doing absolutely nothing—in addition to psychiatric hospitals and prisons.⁹ Heterotopias operate inter-relationally with the sites they mirror, relate to, and contest. They are, by definition, liminal sites that mirror and reflect the common/normal sites, while at the same time contesting them by virtue of separation. They are borderline spaces where subjectivities and identities are transformed and re-imagined from human to non-human, citizen to non-citizen. In the words of Sakr, “Blasim’s story indicates that the refugee reception center is heterotopically situated as ‘other’ to the inaccessible communal space of the town” (Sakr 2018, p. 776). The mirror is a utopia in the sense that what exists in it is not real; it is in the “beyond,” or, as Foucault calls it, “a placeless place” (Foucault 1986, p. 24). These other/different spaces function as frontiers separating the desired from the undesired. Foucault’s example of cemeteries’ relocation from the center to the outskirts of cities and towns coincides with the nineteenth century redefinition of death as illness. Thus, the dead cannot be in close proximity to the living. The heterotopias of deviation and crisis, thusly named by Foucault, constitute the main heterotopic spaces in the modern age and are meant to separate the individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the common norm. Diaspora spaces, as described by Blasim, are heterotopias of deviation. Migrants are trapped in these spaces of crises, preventing them from entering or integrating into the communal, normal spaces.

In “Illegal Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders,” Shahram Khosravi explores the experience of border crossing by “illegal” or undocumented people by drawing upon his own journey from Iran through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to Sweden, where he was granted asylum. For undocumented immigrants, the liminality of the border is inherently dangerous. Khosravi argues, “An illegal traveler is in a space of lawlessness, outside the protection of the law” (Khosravi 2007, p. 324). Border policing is not only meant to exclude transgressors but to penalize them by petrifying them into a state of immobility. Khosravi explains, “I was indistinguishable from the border, I was the border” (Khosravi 2007, p. 332).

Like Carlos Fuentes, Salem Hussein tries to separate himself from the border experience and the criminality attached to it by distancing himself from Adel, who is sent to prison after the autopsy of the Afghan corpse reveals that he had died by strangulation. Immersing himself into the lifestyle of his adopted European country, Salem informs the reader that it has been three years since the border crossing incident and the death of the Afghan man. Salem now works as a translator for the immigration department at the refugee camp in the same borderline town where he also escorts the new quarantine inmates to the hospital: “I wanted to forget my countrymen, and match the rhythm of my life to the slow pace of this border town . . . I drink in the bar every evening. I sleep with a woman who works in the flower shop, who loves me very much. I read the newspaper on the internet” (Blasim 2013, p. 95).

Despite the apparently normal life that Salem seems to be living as a European citizen, the contamination from the experience of border crossing is hard to purify. In fact, Salem still lives in the borderline town where he was once apprehended and interrogated. He is working at the same refugee center escorting new refugees to the quarantine section of the hospital, a place he describes as dirty and crowded. The job, which he took from another Albanian immigrant, reminds the reader that, even after seemingly managing to transcend the status of illegality from clandestine border crossing, refugees and immigrants remain restricted to specific diasporic spaces. These heterotopic spaces operate as impenetrable frontiers of othering and otherness. Hence the refugee's sensation of becoming the border and dwelling indefinitely in the liminal zones separating the human from the non-human.

Like Carlos Fuentes, Salem thinks that by adopting the lifestyle of his new home, he can distance himself from his former identity of a refugee who crossed the border illegally through a precarious and clandestine journey. Yet, the past keeps haunting Salem in the imaginative space of literary narration inside which the boundaries between sanity and madness, reality and fantasy, and past and present are indistinguishable. Like the ring in Carlos Fuentes's story, Salem comes face to face with his past when, suddenly, he makes the decision to visit Adel in his prison cell after three years of hesitation. Salem asks Adel why he had strangled the Afghan man instead of letting him drown by himself. From behind bars, Adel answers hatefully: "You're an arsehole and a fraud. Your name's Hassan Blasim and you claim to be Salem Hussein. You come here and lecture me. Go fuck yourself, you prick" (Blasim 2013, p. 95). This moment of confrontation breaks what, up to this point, appears to be a straightforward account of a refugee story told in a realistic manner. Similarly to the sudden appearance of the nightmares in Salim/Carlos's sleep, this confrontation puts past and present and reality and fiction face to face, breaking the linear narrative of the plot.

Puzzled and confused by his encounter with Adel, Salem's past resurfaces again on the train ride back from the visit when Salem tries to put his life events in order by remembering the first meeting with Adel Salim, the plan to escape from the military, their arrest by the Iranian border guard, the electric shock, the torture, the encounter with the Afghan man, being called Hassan Blasim, and the border crossing. This traumatic past is persistent and resurfaces to override the apparent normalcy of Salem's new life. This trauma reveals itself to be highly portable as it crosses borders with the refugees who flee their homes searching for asylum.

The fantastical element of the plot intensifies when, on that same train, Salem encounters a man carrying a mouse as a birthday gift from his wife. The man, named Saro, introduces himself to Salem. When Salem shakes his hand and mentions that his name is Salem Hussein, Saro finds it strange that he has read several of his stories. Salem affirms to Saro that he does not know what he is talking about and confirms that he is not a writer. Yet Saro asks Salem if Adel Salim killed the Afghan man to obtain the magical compass mentioned in the story "The Killers and the Compass" that appears in Blasim's same collection of short stories immediately before "Why Don't You Write a Novel . . . ?" Then, Saro adds, "Why don't you write a novel, instead of talking about all these characters—Arabs, Kurds, Pakistanis, Sudanese, Bangladeshis and Africans? They would make for mysterious, traditional stories. Let the truth come to light in all its simplicity. Why not enjoy life?" (Blasim 2013, p. 98). After the train stops, Saro picks up his mouse and leaves; then, he comes back, sticks his head through the compartment door, and says, "Why didn't you mention your real name in this story?" (Blasim 2013, p. 99).

Salem and Saro's story, embedded in the framework of Salem and Adel's original story, confuses reality and fiction by creating a moment of narrative perplexity and madness. In Blasim's stories, this state of confusion between two worlds, two identities, and two characters does signify mental illness at times, but it is also used as a trope to question interior and exterior perspectives of war and exile. That is why Blasim cannot write a novel, a mysterious, traditional novel as Saro suggests, where truth comes to light in all its simplicity. The double character Salem/Blasim tells Saro, referencing the renowned

poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi, “truth was once a mirror in the hands of God. Then it fell and broke into a thousand pieces” (Blasim 2013, p. 98). The broken mirror of truth represents the fragmentation and complex realities that linear narratives and sane characters fail to adequately portray in the context of war and exile.

Many Iraqi writers have abandoned realism in their efforts to communicate the horror and violence of everyday life in Iraq, which continues to haunt even refugees and emigrants who leave the country. In the words of Haytham Bahooora:

The aesthetics of horror that Iraqi writers have produced is a variant of postcolonial gothic literary expression . . . A particular expression of this experimentation utilizes the supernatural, the uncanny, the monstrous and the surreal to construct an aesthetic of horror that narrates unspeakable forms of violence . . . Recourse to the supernatural in fiction is thus used to parallel the “unreal” experiences of gruesome violence experienced by Iraqis. (Bahooora 2015, p. 191)

Blasim uses dreams, the supernatural, and madness to portray this (un)reality.

4. Narration and Hope

However, Blasim’s iteration of madness, trauma, and fragmentation on physical, psychological, and literary levels serves to remedy reality rather than distort it, ultimately depicting the horror of war, clandestine border crossing, and the lives of refugees in a way that rational storytelling simply cannot. In Shoshana Felman’s *Writing and Madness*, she proposes that madness, in the realm of the imaginative space of literature, constitutes a futuristic hope: “The ‘material sign’ marks therefore the juncture at which the past meets the future: at which the past is yet to be . . . the future, paradoxically enough, is this memory belonging—to no one—of desire, a memory which transforms recollection into wait: the impossible becomes a hope” (Felman 2003, p. 76). According to Felman, the written sign commemorates a meaning, a past memory. This past has not come to pass yet, and it is transformed by the linguistic sign into a memory projected into the future as a dream, a hope. This meeting point of past and future in the realm of the imaginative is also the point where reality meets fantasy and where the impossibility of the reality/past meets the possibility of hope in the fantasy/future. Thus, in the imaginative space of literary narration, madness carries the possibility of a future dream that not only belongs to the future, but also, on the basis of its creation through the conjunction of past and future inside the linguistic sign, gives meaning and hope to the traumatic past as well.

Literary madness and fragmentation, as portrayed in Blasim’s stories, expand the limitations of our perception of the real and transcend the trauma and horrors of the past to articulate a future dream—a hope that can drive us into new spheres of understanding of the experiences of refugees and their diasporic lives. Literature is a space where the impossibility of the past meets the possibility of the future and where fragmentation, confusion, and madness do not necessarily represent the absurd as meaningless, but, rather, as a meaningful literary dialogue. This dialogue raises our common concern for human suffering and constitutes a hope for a possible future remedy. In Blasim’s own words, “throughout history literature has contributed much to human values and opened our eyes as humans to many facts. It has examined our emotions through imagination.”¹⁰ To this, I would add that when reality becomes unbearable, horrific, and meaningless, imagination and literature mediate the only hope in salvaging meaning from the chaos.

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- ¹ See Marcia Lynx Qualey (2012) “Dear Jordan, You Can Read Hassan Blasim’s (Banned) Stories Here” in *Arablit & Arablit Quarterly*. Available online: <https://arablit.org/2012/04/19/dear-jordan-you-can-get-hassan-blasims-banned-stories-here/> (accessed on 11 March 2023).
- ² See Al-Attabi’s (2018) piece on Hassan Blasim’s *The Iraqi Christ* (The Literary Encyclopedia).
- ³ See Al-Masri’s (2018) “An Enchanted Ring and a Dung Beetle: Contaminated Borders in Hassan Blasim’s Nightmarish Narratives.”
- ⁴ See Yassin-Kassab’s (2013) review of *The Iraqi Christ* in *The Guardian*.
- ⁵ See Biwu’s (2017) analysis on the impossible and the unnaturalness in Hassan Blasim’s short narrative fiction (pp. 184–99).
- ⁶ See note 2.
- ⁷ See Sellman and Litvin’s (2016) interview with Hassan Blasim in *Tank Magazine*.
- ⁸ See Lane Ashfeldt’s (2015) “Literary Defiance: An Interview with Hassan Blasim” in *World Literature Today*.
- ⁹ See Foucault’s (1986) “Of Other Spaces.”
- ¹⁰ See note 8.

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