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**THE 'WAR ON TERROR' OR WAR FOR TERROR IN IRAQ: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF HASSAN BLASIM'S SHORT STORIES**

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Sara Maryam<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Inayat Ullah\*<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Sana Tariq<sup>3</sup>

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**Original Article**

1. Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan
2. Associate Professor, Department of English (Graduate Studies), National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan. Corresponding Email: [inayat@numl.edu.pk](mailto:inayat@numl.edu.pk)
3. Lecturer, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [stariq@numl.edu.pk](mailto:stariq@numl.edu.pk)

**Abstract**

This study carries out the textual analysis of Hassan Blasim's selected short stories to see the ways, in which the US military intervention in Iraq, (in) famously called as 'the War on Terror', results in creating terror, instead of eliminating it. The theoretical underpinnings used for the research have been borrowed from Robert J. C. Young's study on terror effects. The study reveals that terror causes a psychological trauma within individuals. It inhabits the individuals and affects their ways of thinking. This study highlights the impact of the so-called war on terror and brings forth the role of cultural productions which record the debilitating aftermaths of such wars. This research underscores the value of literary texts, which, through such portrayals record the horrors of wars in a bid to to make them part of the cultural memory of the people.

**Keywords:** Trauma, War on Terror, Hassan Blasim, Iraq, Trauma, J. C. Young

**I. Introduction to the Study**

The war on terror started as a response to the September 11 attacks on the twin towers. Since then, it has wreaked havoc on the world and has been criticized for altering the state of affairs in many countries, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. It altered the US foreign policy, as the prime determinant of their policy became the war against terrorism. They divided the world into the ones that were in favor of this war and the ones that were against it, or with the terrorists. The world was given an ultimatum, they were either with them or against them. (Boyle)

Young has traced the history of wars in his book the Empire, the Colony and the Post colony. During 18<sup>th</sup> century there were European wars for territories, in 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism began with physical occupation of states, in 20<sup>th</sup> century there was decolonization and neo-colonialism began as US gained control of independent states through economic forces. In 21<sup>st</sup> century, the war on terror has led to modern form of globalization where military intervention is wrongly justified as a peace keeping mission.

According to Moyn, military intervention is a new method of their civilizing mission. They gain dominance and hegemony over other states by making use of human rights violation. Human rights are viewed through western eyes and their way is seen as the right way. Chamayou writes that advanced technology and globalization has led to extra judicial killings by US through unmanned drones. They can do so without declaring war and there will be no territorial acquisition. Military intervention is used to gain political dominance.

This research focuses on the effect of terror created by the war on terror on Iraqi citizens. To view the war from the victim's perspective and to explore the psychological impact war has on people. The text used for the study are Hassan Blasim's short stories from his collection *The Corpse Exhibition and other stories from Iraq*, Hassan Blasim is an Iraqi born writer. The theoretical underpinnings used for the research will be Robert J. C. Young's study on effects of terror. This study is important mainly because such analyses highlight the impact of the so-called war on terror and brings forth the role of cultural productions which record the debilitating aftermaths of such wars (Ullah, 2020; Hanif & Ullah). This research underscores the value of literary texts, which, through such portrayals record the horrors of wars in a bid to to make them part of the cultural memory of the people.

## II. Research Questions

The study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How does terror act as an affect in Blasim's short stories?
2. In what ways do Blasim's characters suffer from post-war psychological trauma?

## III. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The method of analysis for this research is textual analysis. The text selected for the purpose of research is two short stories from Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq*. The short stories selected are: *The Green Zone Rabbit* and *Crosswords*.

The theoretical underpinnings for this research will be taken from Robert J. C. Young's essay 'Terror Effects'. In this essay Young has highlighted the effects of terror created by the war on terror. He has viewed terror from different dimensions: as affect, gothic, suspense, farce and trauma. According to Young, terror originated in the French Revolution. "in which Terror was the effect of the state, the first instance in which the state itself became the instrument of terror on its subjects, who lived in fear of execution, imprisonment, and torture" (Young, 319). This terror has now moved from aristocracy to the bourgeoisie class. It has become an instrument of psychological warfare, used to intimidate people.

He writes, "The war on terror is often projected as if it were Americans and Europeans who are the main victims of terror. In many cases they are, but I want to end by switching my geographical focus and suggesting that there are in fact different forms of terror that operate very differently elsewhere" (Young, 331).

In his essay 'What is postcolonial?' Young defines postcolonial as the politics of transformation or the product of human experience. He writes that the world should be looked at from below and not from above or from Western perspective. "It means experiencing how differently things look when you live in Baghdād or Benin rather than Berlin or Boston, and understanding why" (Young, 17). This study will look at war on terror not from western perspective but from the perspective of ordinary Iraqi citizen living in a war ridden country to study the effects of terror on them. as individual subjective experiences are important.

## VI. The "War on Terror" and Iraq

According to Boyle, the Global war on terrorism can be seen as a grand strategy of US as it changed the objective of their foreign policy and they made a valid excuse for military interventions into countries marked as terrorists. Even though the term 'terrorist' is abstract and there is no one way of defining it.

Sciullo writes,

“Defining terrorism (and its extrapolations) is complicated because of its nature as a supercharged political act. This is more than the notion that every rhetorical act is political. To define something as terrorism is to politically assign values, and it results in constructing the terrorist as other” (Sciullo, 06).

Thus, war against terror was waged against a tactic as there was no discreet enemy. (Boyle) It was a battle against ghosts which cannot be seen or located. The term is subjective, as everyone has a different definition of it. Terrorists too have a history of being a victim of terrorism which eventually leads them to commit an act of terror. It becomes a never ending cycle. (Sciullo)

‘The battle against ghosts’ is a term used by Sciullo because it was a battle emerging out of fear of ghosts. It was countering terror out of terror. You cannot fight something you can’t locate, thus, it only immersed people further into fear rather than eradicating it. (Sciullo)

According to Sciullo, “Defining terrorism is a political act that demands the oppressive politics of Otherization.” (Sciullo, 06) War on Terrorism drew a boundary between the East and the West, between self and the others. Barkawi in his book *Orientalism and War* writes that war on terrorism ‘othered’ people by labelling them as terrorists. The west made the war into a civilizing mission when actually it was a mission to dominate and maintain their hegemony.

Michael Howard writes that the war on terror was a ‘terrible and irrevocable error’ on the part of Bush administration as it tangled them into a never ending battle against an abstract noun. The war created more foes than friends. According to Boyle, the war raised many questions, one of them is that is fighting terror a matter that should be handled by the judiciary or the military? After their failure to bring peace in Iraq, it raised the question of purpose of their intervention. As the priorities of US foreign policy changed during the war from fighting terror to promoting democracy. The Iraq invasion led to many unintended consequences and killings of innocent public. US dropped the term ‘war on terror’ after the backlash they faced in Iraq. This research will focus on the trauma suffered by the individuals due to the atrocious act of war.

#### **V. Psychological Impact of the Military Intervention in Iraq**

The military intervention in Iraq brought the country to ruins. Atrocities were committed against the public as innocent people were tortured and killed. Many became ‘collateral damage’ in this war. People were transported to prisons if they were suspected to have ties with any terrorist faction. Guantanamo bay is filled with horror stories of Iraqi people. Law was abused under the disguise of ‘holy cause’ of the war. They destroyed the village in an attempt to save it. The excuse used for military intervention in Iraq was the presence of hidden weapons of mass destruction but no such weapons were found. Investigations later revealed that Iraq had no part in the September 11 attacks. (Rajwade)

Thus, the intervention was seen as an invasion and not liberation as was expected by the Bush administration. They expected the Iraqi public to see them as their heroes for liberating them but no such thing happened. The country was left with no functional democracy. There was no peace as the country was divided into sectarian politics. No stable government left the country in shambles. (Rajwade) This research will focus on the lives of individuals and the psychological impact they faced because of war.

Iraqi people became the victims of terror in this war on terror. They were promised security by their dictator and by their liberators but neither of them delivered. After the US invasion, the Iraqi people were forced to think of they were better off with Saddam’s tyranny. (Chin) According to a

study by Chin, US and other European powers have used military for their own interests and agendas in history too. The war on terror was a part of strategy to gain an excuse for crackdown against their opponents. In history too military has been used to maintain dominance over other parties. He writes that Bush was given a choice to deescalate the war when it backfired, he refused and decided to continue. The war created an effect of terror within Iraqi public and had a psychological impact on them. It can be concluded that there is room for this research to study this impact by viewing the stories of individuals under a microscope.

When the aftermath of war is studied, the study is restricted to the stories of war veterans and their suicide rate after war. The study of civilians and the psychological impact in them is rare and should be done. Civilians live not only with physical wounds but also with psychological wounds. The war memories are deep embedded within them and remains imprinted in their minds. They live with the flashbacks of these memories. Apart from losing their loved ones and a stable life, they lose their mental stability too. They suffer from PTSD and psychological disorders. (Behrouzan)

Benfodil wrote "the Iraqis are not completely demoralized. They've learned to live with war," (Benfodil, 03). The children that are brought up in a war torn country live with psychological disorders, they accept war and violence as normal. A study conducted by Al-Mashat reveals that Iraqi children live with a high level of distress. They experience war and loss at a very early age in life due to which they attach different meanings to their war memories and have different coping mechanisms. This conclusion creates a research space for this study as there is room for research in war trauma in individuals that have firsthand experience in war.

Within a decade Iraq has been through a tumult of events, from dictatorship to foreign invasion to sectarian violence, the public has been facing violence at the hands of multiple oppressors. These events have had a considerable impact on the Iraqi literature. It has given rise to war narratives as writers came forward with their first hand versions of war. The literature in Iraq has followed a trajectory parallel to the fluctuations in its culture. The contemporary Iraqi literature has revived social realism. It describes the atrocities of war by providing a panoramic view of the Iraqi post-war state. Many intellectuals have been exiled from the country which is why the literature is a product of inside and outside cultures. The contemporary literature and war narratives give an account of the trauma faced by the individuals, the psychological impact of them and the moral contradictions they had to live with. Blasim draws a picture of post-war Iraq in a very minimalist yet realist manner. His stories are about individual accounts of post-war trauma. (Hanoosh) This research will focus on the post-war narratives and will study the effects of terror on people.

#### **IV. The War on/of Terror and the Mimetic Role of Cultural Productions**

According to Young, war on terror was not only waged on an abstract war but it was waged against a state of fear inside you. Terror effects a person's state of mind. He writes, "Terror" effects terror effects spontaneously, for terror comprises nothing but its effects. Terror effects are self-generating, uncontrollable, proliferating" (Young, 315). Terror effects the psyche of a mind and causes trauma in an individual.

The causes of terror may be external, they come from the outside, triggered by certain events but its effects are internal. It internally harms an individual and manifests inside a human mind. According to Young, "it slides between the visible and the invisible" (Young, 315). In Blasim's short story Crosswords, Marwan sees his father's corpse brought home by the 'death car' and that leaves a mark on his psyche. From a child who was amused by running after cars that

carried corpses to finding his father's dead body in one of them, his life was tainted by terror of war that loomed above their heads at all times. This terror seeped into his head as he began to hear the dead police man's voices and felt his presence inside of him. Thus, his terror was caused by war but its damage was internal.

Terror blurs the boundaries between the subject of the terror and the object of terror. Object of terror is the one causing the terror and subject of the terror is the victim of terror. The line dividing the two has been blurred by the war on terror. The war was against terrorists but the subjects became the innocent people living in Iraq. "The subject of terror is not the terrorist, but those who fear the terrorist and live in fear of him or her, in a state of terror" (Young, 316). The ones that were supposed to be rescued from terror became the prime victims of it. In the story *Crosswords*, Blasim writes, "Life and death was a game of running, climbing, and jumping, of watching, of secret dirty words, of sleep and nightmares" (Blasim, 48). Terror had manifested itself into the minds of children such that life and death became a game to them. Living with nightmares became an everyday routine.

This terror manifests itself in such a way that the subject becomes helpless. They have no option but to live with this terror, make it a part of their lives. The Iraqi people lived in a state of war for more than a decade, facing tyranny at the hands of a dictator, becoming collateral damage in their foreign invader's war and then they were caught in between sectarian clash. After all of this they had to live with post-war psychological consequences. They were helpless in their war-torn country. Young writes that the subjects of terror have no reactions, there is no way for them to rebel against it. "With terrorism it seems that there is no space for reaction – other than the move into the state of affect, of terror" (Young, 316). In the short story *Crosswords*, the protagonist began writing as a means of rebellion because he couldn't find any other way.

An event that terrifies a subject to its core has intense after effects. The terror is not restricted to that one event, it lives with the individual even after the event as the subject anticipates that the event will be repeated. "Terror moves you into a state of producing fiction: it makes you live imaginatively on the borderlines of the real" (Young, 317). It makes you anticipate that the event will be repeated. In *Crosswords*, Marwan goes through a traumatic event when there's bomb blast at his workplace. This event pushes him into a state where the real and imagination were blurred. He believed that the soul of a police officer is living inside him and eating him from within. This imagination drove him insane to the point that he eventually killed himself.

According to Young, "The war on terror is in some sense about trying to counter a thoroughly gothic fear, repeated in countless dreams, of finding yourself out of control" (Young, 318). The terror acts as a gothic fear living inside you so the war on terror become the war against that fear. It leads to nightmares and situations where you lose control. In Blasim's short story *Crosswords*, the characters lived with this gothic fear which created nightmares. This had adverse impact on their psychological wellbeing. They engaged in acts like smoking and having sexual relation with prostitutes at an early age. They looked for ways to counter this terror inside of them.

According to Young, terror can be of two types, state-terror and anti-state terror. The state terror is the one which was practiced during the French revolution where people were tortured and hanged by the state. Anti-state terror is the terror perpetrated against the institutions of state. "State terror and anti-state terror have been inextricably locked within an intense economy, mimicking the master-slave dialectic, ever since...where innocent bystanders are killed, or worse, targeted" (Young, 320). In the short story, *Green Zone Rabbit*, Hajjar the protagonist loses two of

his brothers to state-terror which is why he decides to take revenge and engage in anti-state terror. "When the cycle of violence and the sectarian decapitations began, I planned to escape the country and go to Europe, but then they massacred two of my remaining brothers" (Blasim, 28). This interlocking of state and anti-state terror makes a cycle of violence which is never ending. At the end Hajjar himself nearly becomes a victim of state terror when the car he was supposed to be in blows up. They both give rise to each other and thus, the cycle continues.

Terror as an affect causes nightmares and psychological instability but there is also a certain pleasure in it, according to Young. Burke analyzed this phenomenon in his essay 'Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', he writes that the line between pain and pleasure has been blurred to the point that one can be confused for another. This is evident in Blasim's short stories. He writes in *Green Zone Rabbit*,

"My memory of those years of darkness under sanctions is of devouring books. The electricity would go off for up to twenty hours a day, especially after that series of U.S. air strikes on the presidential palaces. I would snuggle into bed at midnight, and by the light of a candle I would stumble upon another species of kiss" (Blasim, 28)

The protagonist finds pleasure in times of terror when he would snuggle up in his bed and read books while the world outside was under the chaos of US strikes.

"The colonial sublime is the means through which a society is kept within a state of consent, the overarching external power of its visible apparatus and symbolic objects internalized by colonial subjects into a state of fear, disempowerment, and subjugation" (Young, 322). Thus, fear and terror are means employed by colonizers to subjugate and disempower their subjects. Study by Chin has revealed that military intervention in Iraq was used for the political agendas and for the maintenance of dominance and hegemony. The war in Iraq disrupted the lives of its citizens, they couldn't lead a normal life no more, their futures were taken away from them and they were disempowered. The characters in Blasim's short stories were dominated by this fear and terror.

Young has described terror of sublime as the kind of terror that sees into your body and inhabits you from inside. It is like colonization when someone from outside meddles into your internal affairs and causes harm to the normal functioning of the state. This terror when inhabits a person's body, it changes the way they think and view the world. Blasim explains this world through the eyes of his protagonist as, "The world in my head was like a spider web that made a faint hum, the hum of a life about to expire, of breaths held. Delicate, horrible wings flapping for the last time" (Blasim, 29). Life for them became uncertain with death looming over their heads at all times. Terror colonized their minds and took their freedom away from them.

Young has studied the novels written on terror and made conclusions about the effect of terror in these novels. He writes, "These novels are themselves only mildly performative: the reader senses fear and apprehension from the safety of her fictional distance; only the characters within the novel experience terror as such (Young, 327). Blasim captures this terror by detailing the way the characters felt. According to Young, the readers feel the terror through the suspense created by the author. Blasim adds suspense to his works to make the reader feel the terror of his characters. The story *Green Zone Rabbit* leaves a reader in suspense and wonderment which enhances the terror. The suspense is created when Salsal receives an image of rabbit and an egg by the Ministry of Culture and they realize that he is their target. Similarly, in the story

Crosswords, suspense is created by Blasim by writing the story in the form of a dialogue without revealing the identity of the second person which leaves the reader wondering. By the end the reader realizes that the second person is the voice in the protagonist's head which adds terror.

According to Young, war narratives and the literature based on terror attempt to recreate traumatic events and everyday fears. They do so to resist terror. Thus, writing about terror becomes a means of fighting terror. They recreate events so as to make them seem less scary and eradicate the fear attached to them. "We would vent our need to rebel by writing on ideological and social themes" (Blasim, 53). Blasim's protagonist from Crosswords used writing as a means of rebellion because there was nothing else they could do.

"Terror must be effective" (Young, 329) and what makes this terror effective is the symbolic meaning attached to it. For example the attack against twin towers was an attack against capitalism and blasting a Mosque is symbolic for war against Islam. Thus, these symbols make terror effective. In the short story *The Green Zone Rabbit*, Salsal is the rabbit and the green zone is symbolic for the state, thus, the story is about the plan of assassination of Salsal by the state. This symbolic meaning increases terror and makes it more effective.

### **Terror as Trauma**

Young writes that in countries where,

"terror has moved from the dialectics of traditional terrorism into a porous landscape in which terror has leaked into unreadable forms of arbitrary violence beyond the realm of all political and social institutions of power: in short, into trauma" (Young, 332).

Terror causes trauma in a number of ways. In war ridden countries like Iraq there is a physical threat but the subject of terror forms an imagined threat which stays with them at all times and causes fear and terror. This imagined threat, according to Young, is caused due to living in a constant state of terror. Even when the actual threat is not present, the subject remains under the terror of it. In the short story *The Green Zone Rabbit*, when Hajjar finds the egg both companions sense fear and stand guard. They stay awake at nights watching the door and patrolling the house. The egg creates a terror in them and they imagine a threat to their security.

Trauma is enhanced when people live in a state of terror on day to day basis. The small acts of terror they live through may not be traumatic in isolation but collectively they impact the psyche on an individual significantly. They are drops of acid falling on a rock. As in the story *Crosswords*, "Marwan and I would chase the coffins. We would wait for them to reach the turn off the main road. The war was in its fourth year by this point" (Blasim, 49). Chasing coffins became an everyday routine and game for them. They knew the severity of it and wanted to act like adults who would salute and sob as corpses appear every day but they couldn't. This day to day ritual became traumatic from them as they grew up in the shadow of its terror.

This terror not only harms the individual psyche of an individual but also has negative consequences for the individual's relationship. A person with an unstable mind is incapable of having a stable relationship. Marwan's relationship with his wife was ruined after his accident. He survived the accident but his mind became unstable. These individuals do not know the reason behind their instability and thus, gain no closure. They do not know who to blame as there are multiple players in action. Thus, according to Young, in war torn countries there is a high suicide rate. Marwan too committed suicide when he could no longer stand the voices inside his head.

Different individuals respond to this trauma in different ways. Some isolate themselves and abandon emotion. While others move beyond their trauma, and rebuild themselves. According to Young, terror and trauma caused by it makes an individual reactive and not creative. The individual becomes reactive by panicking and not thinking clearly. As in the story Green one Rabbit, the terror caused by the egg panicked Hajjar and Salsal and they couldn't figure out the plan for their assassination and that all was a set up. Thus, the trauma caused by terror makes a person psychologically unstable.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that the US military intervention in Iraq has failed as the so-called war on terror created more terror within the Iraqi citizens. This terror affected their psychological wellbeing. The study reveals that terror resides within individuals, it affects their way of thinking and causes trauma. As an aftermath of the US war on terror in Iraq, the common Iraqi citizens (victims of the war) imagine a threat to their wellbeing, suffer from it on a daily basis, isolate themselves and may cause self-harm. Further studies in this area can be done by studying the coping mechanism, used by the individuals to resist this terror.

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