Narrating The Conflict: Analysing Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq*

Dr. Sadiya Nair S*

Assistant Professor & Programme Coordinator, Dept. of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, JAIN (Deemed-to-be) University, 44/4, District Fund Rd, behind Big Bazaar, Kottapalya, Jayanagara 9th Block, Jayanagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560069, India

*Corresponding author: Dr. Sadiya Nair S
Assistant Professor & Programme Coordinator, Dept. of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, JAIN (Deemed-to-be) University, 44/4, District Fund Rd, behind Big Bazaar, Kottapalya, Jayanagara 9th Block, Jayanagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560069, India

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Abstract: **Original Research**

Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* is a powerful collection of short stories that explores the violence, trauma, and absurdity of war-torn Iraq. This paper examines Blasim's narrative strategies in representing conflict through a theoretical lens, drawing on narratology concepts outlined by Mieke Bal, Porter Abbott, Seymour Chatman, and others. By analyzing the interplay of **fable, story, and text**, as well as the role of **time, space, and focalization**, this study aims to explore how Blasim's fragmented, surreal, and often metafictional narratives challenge traditional war storytelling and redefine the boundaries of conflict literature. Additionally, the paper investigates the psychological impact of war on narrative structure, emphasizing the ways in which Blasim's storytelling mirrors the disorientation and instability experienced by individuals in conflict zones. By applying narratological theories to Blasim's work, this study highlights the deconstruction of conventional linear narratives, reinforcing the notion that war literature is inherently subjective and shaped by memory, trauma, and historical interpretation.

Keywords: Narratology, war literature, conflict representation, focalization, fragmentation, metafiction, trauma narratives, nonlinear storytelling.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict literature has long been a means of documenting war, trauma, and displacement. Hassan Blasim, an Iraqi writer known for his experimental and unsettling storytelling, presents a unique approach to narrating war in *The Corpse Exhibition*. His narratives do not simply recount the horrors of war but deconstruct conventional storytelling to emphasize the chaos, absurdity, and psychological toll of violence.

This study examines Blasim's narratives through the lens of narratology, particularly the structural framework provided by Mieke Bal, who distinguishes between the **fable, story,** and **text** as key components of narrative.

1.1 Narratology and Conflict: Theoretical Framework

Mieke Bal's narratological model divides a narrative into three distinct levels:

1. **Fable** – The logical and chronological sequence of events.
2. **Story** – The manner in which these events are represented to the audience.
3. **Text** – The verbal (or in some cases, visual) presentation of the story.

In *The Corpse Exhibition*, Blasim frequently disrupts the fable-story-text relationship. His stories often begin in familiar settings before shifting into **surreal, fragmented, or metafictional narratives** that disorient the reader. These techniques challenge conventional representations of war and

emphasize the instability of truth in war narratives.

Porter Abbott's notion of **chrono-logic** i.e., the dual temporality of a narrative is also significant. Blasim's narratives often manipulate time by collapsing past and present, creating temporal loops, or shifting perspectives mid-story. This aligns with Seymour Chatman's distinction between external (discourse time) and internal (story time) movement in narratives, highlighting how Blasim distorts time to reflect the fractured experiences of war survivors.

A cursory note on Narrative and its theoretical aspects would help in analysing *The Corpse Exhibition* to a considerable extent. Porter Abbot in his book *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* defines narrative as:

> "…the representation of an event or series of events (…) without an event or an action, you may have a description, an exposition, an argument, a lyric, some combination of these or something else altogether, but you won't have a narrative." (13)

Abbot reiterates the words of Seymour Chatman who calls the narrative structure as 'chrono-logic'. He states the aspects which makes the narrative unique and memorable:

> "What makes narrative unique among text-types is its 'chrono-logic', it's doubly temporal logic. Narrative entails movement through time, not only 'externally' (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also 'internally' (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot). The first operates in that dimension of nature called Discourse (…), the second in that called Story…
> Non-narrative text types do not have an internal time sequence, even though, obviously they need time to read, view or hear. Their underlying structures are static or atemporal." (Symour-4/ Porter-16)

About the time and the spatial aspects in a graphic /comic narrative, Chute states that:

> "…comic panel fractures both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments". (455)

In the realm of graphic and comic narratives, Chute notes that **fractured time and space** contribute to the disjointed experience of reading a war narrative. Though Blasim's work is textual rather than graphic, his stories employ a similar technique*: jump cuts, abrupt shifts, and dreamlike sequences* that mimic the panel-to-panel movement of a comic, creating a rhythm of discontinuity and rupture.

Andrew Glazzard in his article *Losing the Plot Narrative* quotes the words of Mieke Bal from book *Narratology*.

> "…any narrative, which in literary criticism, is understood simply as any sequence of events that is narrated by an agent or subject to an audience- has three layers: the fable, the story and the text. The fable is 'a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by the actors.' The story is how the events are represented to the readers. The text is the verbal presentation of the story. Each of these levels comprise several elements. The fable includes four elements- events, actor, time and location. The story comprises six: perspective or focalization, sequential ordering, rhythm (speed of presentation), frequency (of events), characterization and space. The text layer includes the narrator, description, levels of narration (whether directly observed, reported, embedded and so on) … we might add other elements that make up the verbal texture of the narrative to the textual layer, such as rhetorical devices, figures of speech and register." (14)

Additionally, theorists like Porter Abbott and Seymour Chatman emphasize the role of **chrono-logic, time, space, and focalization** in shaping narratives of war. By applying these theoretical insights to Blasim's stories, this paper aims to understand how his narratives dismantle linear storytelling,

foreground the fragmentation of war, and interrogate the reliability of narration itself.

Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* employs narrative disruption, fragmentation, and surrealism to challenge traditional war storytelling. His manipulation of fable-story-text relationships and chrono-logic creates a disorienting experience that mirrors the chaos, trauma, and instability of war. Several stories in the collection exemplify these techniques:

1.2 Disruption of Fable-Story-Text Relationship:

The story follows an unnamed narrator who is being recruited into a bizarre organization that turns murdered bodies into artistic exhibitions. The premise begins in a seemingly structured setting—a formal job interview—but quickly descends into an abstract, grotesque, and surreal world, forcing the reader to question the boundaries between fiction, horror, and reality.

Manipulation of Chrono-Logic:

The story's timeline remains unclear, as the protagonist's initiation into the organization blends past and present seamlessly, reflecting the timelessness of violence and its normalization in war-torn societies. The lack of linear progression makes it difficult for the reader to pinpoint whether the narrator is recounting an event as it happens, in retrospect, or as a detached observation.

1.3 The Reality and the Record
Distorted Time and Truth:

The protagonist, a journalist, works for a state-controlled media that fabricates war reports. The story plays with multiple layers of reality, where the line between truth and fiction is constantly blurred. Blasim manipulates external discourse time and internal story time, as the protagonist rewrites events, effectively altering history itself.

Meta-Narrative Disruption:

The self-aware nature of the story questions the authenticity of war narratives and exposes the constructed nature of historical records, making the reader an accomplice in uncovering how war is represented and remembered.

1.4 An Army Newspaper
Collapsing Past and Present:

The protagonist, a writer, finds himself caught between his past experiences as a soldier and his present role in propaganda journalism. Blasim presents these two realities as interwoven, making it impossible to separate personal memory from political manipulation. The story's temporal shifts create a loop where the protagonist experiences war not as a linear event, but as an ever-recurring cycle of violence and revisionism.

Metafictional Elements:

Like *The Reality and the Record*, this story calls attention to the fabrication of war narratives and the ethical dilemmas of storytelling in conflict zones. The text seems to question whether war narratives serve to document truth or perpetuate propaganda.

1.5 The Song of the Goats
Chrono-Logic and Psychological Disintegration:

The protagonist, a former soldier, recounts a past war experience in which he is ordered to kill a man who turns out to be a duplicate of himself. The blurring of identity, past trauma, and hallucination makes the narrative unstable, forcing the reader to experience war as a psychological rather than chronological event.

Temporal Loops and Fragmentation:

The protagonist revisits his trauma through flashbacks and disjointed memories, making the past feel as vivid and real as the present. This distortion of time reflects the lingering effects of PTSD, where survivors are unable to separate their current reality from their traumatic past.

Blasim's manipulation of fable, story, and text—along with his use of chrono-logic and temporal distortion—makes his narratives unsettling yet deeply reflective of the fractured realities of war survivors. His work deconstructs traditional war storytelling by presenting war not as a linear sequence of events but as an endless

cycle of trauma, misinformation, and existential disarray. Through these narrative strategies, Blasim invites the reader to question what is real, what is fabricated, and how war stories are constructed, consumed, and remembered.

1.2 Blasim's Narrative Techniques in *The Corpse Exhibition*

1. Focalization and the Unreliable Narrator

Blasim frequently employs *unreliable narrators,* a hallmark of postmodern and conflict, as he guides the reader through a surreal, macabre initiation process. However, the shifting tone and ambiguous details force the audience to question the reliability of the narrative. This aligns with Mieke Bal's concept of **focalization**, where the perspective through which events are filtered shapes the audience's perception of reality. In Blasim's stories, focalization is often unstable, making it difficult to determine what is real and what is imagined, reinforcing the chaotic nature of war.

The narrator's unreliability also reflects the disinformation and paranoia inherent in conflict zones. The reader experiences the disorientation, fear, and surrealism of war through characters who themselves are struggling to discern reality from hallucination. This technique serves as a meta-commentary on the nature of war narratives, where history and memory are contested, and truth itself becomes fragmented.

2. Fragmentation and Chrono-Logic

Blasim's stories often do not follow a **linear sequence**. Instead, they jump between timelines, perspectives, and realities. This aligns with Abbott's *concept of "chrono-logic,"* where narratives operate on both external (discourse) and internal (story) time. In *The Reality and the Record*, for example, the protagonist's perception of events is constantly shifting, mirroring the unpredictability of war.

This **nonlinear storytelling** disrupts conventional war narratives, which often follow a cause-effect progression. By contrast, Blasim's narratives evoke the psychological state of war victims, where past, present, and imagined realities blur together. The absence of a clear beginning, middle, and end mirrors the unresolved trauma of conflict survivors.

In this way, Blasim's use of **fractured chronology** resonates with Chute's analysis of comic panels, where each moment is isolated yet interconnected. The staccato rhythm of his storytelling, with abrupt jumps and shifts in tone, further emphasizes the chaotic temporality of war.

3. Thematic Use of Space and Setting

Space and setting play a crucial role in Blasim's narratives, reinforcing the **physical and psychological impact of war**. According to Bal, a narrative's fable includes elements such as actors, events, time, and location. In Blasim's stories, locations often shift unpredictably, reflecting the instability of war-torn Iraq.

For instance, in *The Corpse Exhibition*, the setting is both **specific and universal**—a shadowy institution that could exist anywhere yet is deeply rooted in Iraq's legacy of violence. This vagueness enhances the allegorical quality of the story, making it a commentary on war, authoritarianism, and the commodification of death.

Similarly, in *An Army Newspaper*, the protagonist's physical environment is constantly shifting, mirroring his psychological disintegration. This aligns with Chatman's theory that space in narratives is not just a backdrop but an active force shaping events.

4. Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity

Blasim frequently employs **metafiction**, where the narrative draws attention to its own constructed nature. This aligns with Ghosh's assertion that **text and image in comics work together, often blurring the boundary between reality and representation**. In Blasim's work, **text becomes self-aware**, challenging readers to question the role of storytelling in war narratives.

To understand the interconnectedness between the text and the image. it is worth quoting the words of Ghosh, who states in the *Anthology of Comics* that the text and the image are one and the same. To quote

"…Text and the image are one. They don't move in parallel tracks but together. In many places, the text even becomes an image…both having their strong independent roles in terms of disseminating information. The details of space, the characters, the look and the expression are the advantages of the visual that need not be articulated in the text. Similarly, thoughts and opinions are often illustrated through text." (09)

For instance, in *The Song of the Goats*, a character recounts his own experiences as a writer, mirroring Blasim's role as an Iraqi author. This blurring of fiction and reality highlights how narratives shape collective memory and personal trauma.

Similarly, *The Reality and the Record* directly challenges the reliability of history, as the protagonist manipulates official records, erasing and rewriting events. This serves as a critique of how war narratives are shaped by power, propaganda, and personal bias.

CONCLUSION

Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition* redefines how war and conflict are narrated, employing fragmentation, unreliable narration, chrono-logic, and metafiction to disrupt traditional storytelling. By applying the theories of Mieke Bal, Porter Abbott, Seymour Chatman, Chute, and Ghosh, we see how Blasim's narratives mirror the disorientation, absurdity, and brutality of war in ways that conventional storytelling cannot capture.

His use of shifting focalization, fractured time, unstable spaces, and self-reflexivity forces readers to engage critically with war narratives, recognizing them not as absolute truths but as subjective, unstable, and deeply human accounts of conflict. In doing so, Blasim not only narrates war but deconstructs the very idea of how war should be told.

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