WRITING THE DISMEMBERED NATION: THE AESTHETICS OF HORROR IN IRAQI NARRATIVES OF WAR

By Haytham Bahoora

Sinan Antoon's second novel, *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (The Corpse Washer), begins with a repetitive nightmare—the narrator Jawad sees his former girlfriend lying naked on a marble bench beckoning him.[1] He too is naked. As Jawad, a corpse washer by profession, approaches her, she urges him to wash her so they can be together. "Why would I wash you?" he asks. "You're still alive." This idyllic scene is interrupted by the following:

> I think I hear a car approaching. I turn around and see a Humvee driving at an insane speed, leaving a trail of flying dust. It suddenly swerves to the right and comes to a stop a few meters away from us. Its doors open. Masked men wearing khaki uniforms and carrying machine guns rush towards us. I try to shield Reem with my right

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> hand, but one of the men has already reached me. He hits me in the face with the stock of his machine gun. I fall to the ground. He kicks me in the stomach. Another starts dragging me away from the washing bench. None of them says a word. I am screaming and cursing them, but I can't hear myself. Two men force me to get down on my knees and tie my wrists with a wire behind my back. One of them puts a knife to my neck; the other blindfolds me. I try to run away but they hold me tightly. I scream again, but cannot hear my screams. I hear only Reem's shrieks, the laughter and grunts of the men, the sound of the rain.
>
> I feel a sharp pain, then the cold blade of the knife penetrating my neck. Hot blood spills over my chest and back. My head falls to the ground and rolls like a ball on the sand. I hear footsteps. One of the men takes off my blindfold and shoves it into his pocket. He spits in my face and goes away. I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood.[2]

The narration of violent corporeal dismemberment in this, the first scene of the novel, is notable for its routineness and its casual enactment, but also because it establishes the centrality of a dismembering violence, here in the form of a decapitation, to the contemporary Iraqi experience. That this scene occurs in a repetitive dream sequence reveals its penetration into the recesses of the narrator's subconscious, establishing a metaphysical presence and suggesting that the effects of the violence the narrator has witnessed in daily life have been absorbed beyond the realm of the material. 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. For Jawad, dreaming the violent spectacle allows him to witness his own decapitation—an out-of-body experience in which the mind is conscious of the self's corporeal dismemberment and simultaneously witnesses the spectacle as a voyeur. This self-witnessing of violence stages a relationship between embodied and disembodied violence, between the terror of violence inflicted on the physical self and the concurrent psychic processing of the event. The narrative function of this

separation is to underscore the many afterlives of violence for those who see and experience it. For Jawad, a traditional corpse washer who prepares violently dismembered and mutilated corpses for burial, the subconscious acts as the playground where the residue of unspeakable violence witnessed elsewhere is manifested.

Literary and artistic representations of the body's violent dismemberment and mutilation are a recurring feature of post-2003 Iraqi cultural production, from literature to the visual arts. These representations include portrayals of decapitations, dismembered limbs, tortured bodies, and charred remains of corpses. Visual artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's installation piece *You Cannot Erase the Traces of War* (2008), for example, positions a headless male torso in a series of repetitive photographic images. In each frame, a headless (perhaps decapitated?) torso is violated in different ways—burned, mutilated, slashed, and torn—and superimposed with iconic images of Iraq's ancient past.[Figure 1].

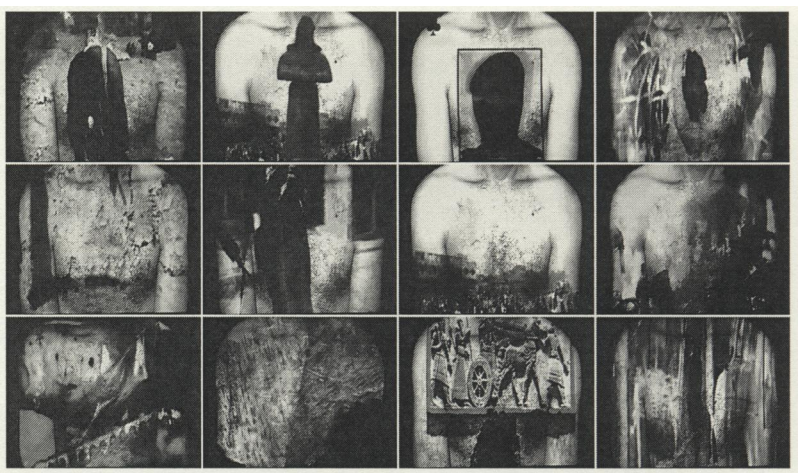

Figure 1: Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *"You cannot erase the traces of war"* (2008)

The sequence of headless torsos suggests a repetitive experience with violence, centering the (male) body as the site of multiple forms of violation and mutilation. Similarly, artist Wafaa Bilal's work instrumentalizes the spectacle of his own body's mutilation to confront the (Western?) viewer with his/her

own complicity in killing Iraqis. Bilal's interactive video installation *Shoot an Iraqi* (originally titled *Domestic Tension*, 2007) invited Internet viewers to shoot the artist by directing their commands to a robotic paintball gun in a Chicago art gallery, where he was confined to a 32x15-foot space. By the end of the exhibition, Bilal's website had received 80,000,000 hits and more than 65,000 shots had been fired at him by participants from 136 countries.[3]

According to Bilal, the inspiration for the project was the killing of his brother by a US drone strike. In Bilal's words, "Only when I watched an interview with an American soldier who was sitting in Colorado, directing these drone planes and dropping bombs on people in Iraq, did I realize that she was completely disconnected psychologically and physically"[4] from the drone's targets. By inviting participants to shoot his confined body, Bilal's installation communicates a didactic message to participants about the mechanisms of delivering high-tech violence and the disappearance of the bodies targeted by such violence. Unlike the real operators of drones, who are not directly confronted with the bodies their machines destroy, Bilal's staging of the violent spectacle presents viewers and participants with an actual Iraqi body to "shoot." As a staged performance, Bilal's exhibition did not attempt to simulate a drone strike's real dismembering effects on his body, but rather confronted the psychological mechanisms through which such violence is enabled, in this case using a hyperreal video-game simulacrum to draw attention to the ways that technology and violence function together to abstract the destructive effects of violence on its victims. Moreover, such a staged performance of violence highlights the ways that enactments of extreme violence are intended to communicate structures of power and domination to those who witness such spectacles.

In this article, I analyze the fictional work of three Iraqi writers, Ahmad Sa'dawi, Hassan Blasim, and Lu'ay Hamza 'Abbas, as representative of a particular expression of post-2003 Iraqi fiction that addresses the terror of violence in Iraq by rendering spectacles of extreme and "unreal" violence in their texts. The writers accomplish this through recourse to the metaphysical—whether dream-states that highlight the uncanny, nightmares, and the subconscious, as in the fiction of Antoon and 'Abbas—or through the supernatural, horror, and the monstrous, as in the fiction of Blasim and Sa'dawi. Blasim's narratives disorient the reader, using a dark, fragmented aesthetic to create a terrain of horror where violence is pervasive, brutal, and

ordinary—a mundane fixture of the national landscape that is constitutive of contemporary Iraqi identity. Sa'dawi's use of a literary monster in his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* rewrites the canonical literary monster of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* as an Iraqi monster, stitched together from the dismembered bodies of Iraqis and reanimated as a symbol of the murderous past rising to intervene in the present. 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 in favor of the intangible, suggesting the impossibility of realistically rendering the experience of such brutality and implying that the Iraqi reality is itself monstrous and irrational. This literary strategy does not simply seek to represent experiences of terror, but to produce it in the reader through shocking portraits that disrupt a status quo in which the horrors of violence in Iraq have been naturalized and often forgotten. These stylistic and thematic renderings of the post-2003 Iraqi experience through a fiction of horror are stylistically gothic, containing many of the aesthetic qualities of postcolonial gothic fiction, a literary genre expressly concerned with questions of history and the return of the repressed through dark narratives that stage spectacles of horror through use of the supernatural, the uncanny, and the monstrous.

For contemporary Iraqi writers and artists, whether still in Iraq or forced into exile, the violent post-2003 national landscape is a constitutive thematic concern of their artistic production. The centrality of representations of dismembering violence to the narration of post-2003 Iraqi identity raises a series of questions about the role narrative fiction plays in constructing a history and experience of structural violence for which there has been no political, legal, or historical accountability. Absent this accountability, post-2003 Iraqi literary narratives intervene to articulate the unspeakable, lost, repressed, or deliberately silenced historical narratives of victims of this structural violence. What kinds of aesthetic strategies do Iraqi writers use to narrate these experiences of extreme violence and their effects? How do they attempt to depict spectacles of violence, torture, and dismemberment in fictional narratives when such violence exceeds the power of description? How do these narratives stage the violent spectacle in such a way as to highlight the terror of the everyday and the residues of unspeakable acts of brutality in those who experience or witness them? Finally, how does

the textual staging of these acts of dismembering violence directed at the individual body intervene in historical and political understandings of the nation itself, in particular to the possibility of Iraq's *national* dismemberment?

The dismemberment of Iraqi bodies in fiction can be read as a metaphor for the viability of Iraq's cohesion and the possibility of its very national continuity. In the process of staging spectacles of extreme violence, these texts produce a historical ontology that locates violence as a consequence of the political, legal, and material legacy of decades of war and dictatorship. In stark contrast to pervasive popular representations of violence in Iraq that locate it as a product of age-old religious animosities, this narrative genealogy of violence does not simply seek its representation or to "reflect" an increasingly inscrutable reality, but to historicize the many manifestations of violence and to intervene in dominant discourses that suppress or misrepresent the roots of such violence.

The Aesthetics of Horror and the Postcolonial Gothic

The post-2003 period in Iraq has seen an unprecedented proliferation of novels and short story collections that seek to narrate the war's impact on Iraqis. The outpouring of narrative fiction by Iraqi writers, both novels and short story collections, can be partly attributed to the fall of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship and its strict censorship practices. But there is also an urgency to narrating the silenced, repressed, and untold experiences of Iraqis that accounts for this surge in literary production. Moreover, the burden of representation placed on cultural production is more pronounced in the context of a constricted public sphere and the dissolution of a coherent national space as occurred in Iraq after the dismantling of state institutions and the introduction of a sectarian political system by US occupation authorities. The proliferation of post-2003 Iraqi fiction may be productively compared to Lebanese literary production after the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. That period that saw a significant increase in novel writing, the novel genre being perhaps most suited to narrate the intensity of the horrors of Lebanese civil war and its impact on the individual, who often served as a metaphor for the broken nation. Iraqi writers do not write of the post-2003 period in isolation from previous decades, but rather as the culmination of the events of prior decades. These include the years of Saddam Hussein's

brutal rule, encompassing the 1980-88 war with Iran, the devastating 1991 Gulf War in which Iraq's civil infrastructure was heavily damaged, and the long embargo years of the 1990s, which was characterized by starvation, impoverishment, and an exodus of the middle class from the country.[5] The pervasiveness of violence during these decades has meant that contemporary Iraqi fiction can scarcely avoid its representation.

Post-2003 Iraqi fiction engages a range of issues, including the post-invasion transformation of Iraqi civil institutions and the disappearance of a coherent public sphere, the condition of exile experienced by millions of Iraqis, the reordering of public space in Iraqi cities through sectarian ethnic cleansing, the ways that the violence of war is gendered, nostalgia for the multiethnic Iraqi past in relation to the contemporary fate of Iraqi minorities, the presence of US occupation troops in the country, and the fragmented, inscrutable reality Iraqis inhabit.[6] Post-2003 Iraqi fiction is stylistically varied. Some narratives deploy an incoherent narrative style, others dark comedy, and others have revived a realist aesthetic. Yasmeen Hanoosh writes that the diverse post-war Iraqi literary landscape includes writers like Mahmud Sa'id and 'Abd al-Khaliq al-Rikabi, whose literary output echoes and extends Iraq's social realist tradition. Moreover, Hanoosh observes that the post-2003 literary scene is characterized by experimental texts that have forged a new path.[7] A particular expression of this literary experimentation utilizes the supernatural, the uncanny, the monstrous, and the surreal to construct an aesthetic of horror that narrates unspeakable forms of violence. The use of these stylistic conventions suggests that for some Iraqi writers, literary realism, which depends on verisimilitude in rendering an accurate representation of reality to the reader, cannot adequately convey the violence Iraqis have experienced. Recourse to the supernatural in fiction is thus used to parallel the "unreal" experiences of gruesome violence experienced by Iraqis.

The aesthetics of horror that Iraqi writers have produced is a variant of postcolonial gothic literary expression.[8] The gothic, as Walter Scott described it in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, a seminal text of the genre, is "above all the art of exciting surprise and horror."[9] Its European practitioners used gothic stylistic techniques as a dark counter-narrative to European narratives of progress and to "explore the role the irrational could play in critiquing quasi-rationalistic accounts of experience."[10] In its

earliest manifestations, gothic fiction critiqued Enlightenment notions of an objective reality that could be apprehended rationally.[11] As a "literature of nightmare," the gothic found its appeal through "explorations of mysterious supernatural energies, immense natural forces, and deep, dark human fears and desires."[12] As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues, from its earliest expressions, the European gothic tradition was "fundamentally linked to colonial settings, characters, and realities as frequent embodiments of the forbidding and frightening."[13] With the geographic expansion of the British Empire came a "vast source of frightening 'others'" who would populate the gothic genre. "With the inclusion of the colonial," Paravisini-Gebert writes, "a new sort of darkness—of race, landscape, erotic desire, and despair—enters the gothic genre."[14] Indeed, critics have associated some of the early seminal texts of the genre, from *Dracula* to the *Island of Dr. Moreau* to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, with the colonial project and the anxieties, primarily cultural and racial, that accompanied it.[15]

In its colonial manifestations, the gothic in narrative has been closely linked to fears of racial miscegenation and slave rebellion, with the Caribbean as the preeminent geographic site of its expression in fiction. Gothic literature, in its exploration of the violence of colonial conditions, "focused on this region's African-derived belief systems as symbolic of the islands' threatening realities, of the brutality, bizarre sacrifices, cannibalism, and sexual aberrations that filled the imagination of authors and their audiences with lurid, terror-laden imagery."[16] European writers instrumentalized colonized spaces and their 'others' to populate their fiction in order to both entertain and register anxiety about aspects of the colonial enterprise and its consequences. But colonized writers wrote back, transforming the conventions of the gothic to rewrite the canon itself, to reclaim indigenous practices, and to narrate the terrors of colonial violence from the perspectives of its victims. The colonized space, with its violence and cruelty, was thus the "locus of horror necessary for the writing of gothic literature."[17]

Contemporary expressions of colonial and postcolonial gothic fiction span a wide range of geographic settings, manifested in various national and linguistic literary traditions. Nevertheless, despite its diverse geographic settings, the postcolonial gothic has explored a set of questions related to colonialism and its persistently haunting effects, focusing on the relationship between colonial conquest and its unspeakable manifestations of violence.[18]

The many expressions of postcolonial gothic literature respond in particular to questions of the postcolonial domestic space, focusing thematically on "questions concerning legitimate origins, rightful inhabitants, usurpation and occupation, and nostalgia for an impossible national politics."[19] Indeed, the appearance of gothic stylistic features in postcolonial fiction has been linked to the failure of the postcolonial national political project, exposing the "unsolvable nature of political and historical conflicts" and ultimately the failure of the national allegory.[20] Moreover, the postcolonial gothic, as a literature of horror that intervenes to narrate national failure and disintegration, is defined formatively by a historical sensibility that is manifested in the return of the repressed and the deliberately silenced histories of the colonial.[21] The emphasis on the gothic's historical sensibility is critical in the context of Iraq, where competing, silenced, and suppressed histories manifest themselves through horrific and spectacular uses of violence that are meant to call attention to the ways the victims of the past continually haunt the present.

Literary haunting by the uncanny, the supernatural, or the monstrous thus becomes symbolic of the past intervening in the present in order to confront what has been suppressed or cast aside. In the political context of a perpetual US war on terror, gothic literature, which Robert J. C. Young has termed a "literature of terror," "has the unique ability to not only represent terror, to mediate it through narration, but also to produce it."[22] As primary targets of the US war on terror, Iraqis have been and continue to be subject to spectacular forms of violence, including most infamously a "shock and awe" military campaign aimed at instilling fear and terror in the Iraqi population, and the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The spectacular nature of such displays of violence, staged to exhibit and impose forms of domination—both political and bodily—are only the most notorious incidents that triggered, as with the art of Alfraji and Bilal, the appearance of gothic thematics in Iraqi art and fiction. The Iraqi narratives I analyze here portray the routine nature of violence in Iraq—from the everyday bombings in Baghdad and their scores of dismembered victims, to brutal sectarian kidnappings whose victims' decapitated bodies litter Baghdad's streets, to scenes of public execution. These narratives instrumentalize the horrific and the gruesome to narrate how unspeakable forms of violence are reconstituted, but never consigned to the past. In these narratives, the appearance of postcolonial gothic literary techniques and themes—from

the stylistic use of the grotesque and the supernatural, to an engagement with themes such as the possible failure of Iraq's national allegory—is overwhelmingly characterized by a persistent haunting of the present by the past.

The Nation and Its Monsters: *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the Return of History

> They are the risen remains of the dismembered Iraqis left behind by blasts of Hellfire and cruise missiles, howitzers, grenade launchers and drone strikes. They are the avengers of the gruesome torture and the sexual debasement that often came with being detained by American troops. They are the final answer to the collective humiliation of an occupied country, the logical outcome of Shock and Awe, the Frankenstein monster stitched together from the body parts we left scattered on the ground.[23]

Ahmad Sa'dawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), winner of the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, is the most stylistically gothic of the texts discussed in this article.[24] Adapting the figure of Frankenstein's monster to the post-2003 Iraqi context, the text deploys the supernatural, the gruesome, and the monstrous to narrate a bloody landscape in which the past is resurrected to haunt the present. The novel takes place in 2005, in the Baghdad neighborhood of al-Batawin, the site of a car bomb explosion that unites the diverse cast of neighborhood characters, from Elishua, the elderly Christian woman mourning the disappearance of her son Danyal decades earlier during the Iraq-Iraq war, to Faraj al-Dallal, a real estate agent who tries to persuade Elishua to sell her old home to him, to Hadi al-'Attag, Elishua's disheveled, unkempt neighbor who is drawn to Baghdad's many bombing sites with a sackcloth searching for human body parts left behind. The explosion in al-Batawin occurs at al-Tayran Square, where day laborers gather on a corner each morning in the hopes of finding work. Amidst the liveliness and bustle of the square itself—where peddlers of cigarettes, sweets, and clothing intermingle and loudly sell their wares—a car approaches, seemingly offering the laborers work. As the laborers draw near, the vehicle explodes, its smoke "swallowing up the surrounding cars and the bodies inside them, cutting electricity lines and killing birds, shattering glass and collapsing doors, cracking the walls of nearby homes and collapsing the

old roofs of al-Batawin, all in one moment."[25] The explosion, seen from afar by the terrified eyes of bystanders, could also be smelled from afar, with its intermingling of "burning plastic, car cushions, and barbecued flesh—a smell you will not smell again in your life."[26]

Hadi al-'Attag watches the scene of the explosion calmly, intent on the carnage before him while smoking a cigarette. He is looking for something in the midst of this "festival of ruin and destruction."[27] Upon locating it, he stealthily picks it up, puts it in his sackcloth, and returns home, whereupon the reader learns what he has retrieved at the explosion: a human nose. This body part is the final piece of his creation, a corpse he has painstakingly stitched together from limbs and organs retrieved from the sites of Baghdad's many explosions. The naked corpse "oozes a light sticky fluid from its wounded body parts" with "only a small amount of blood—dried blood on its arms and legs, with bruises and blue abrasions around its shoulders and neck. The color of the corpse was not easy to define; in any case, its color was not consistent."[28] Al-'Attag pulls out the fresh, bloody nose from his sackcloth, "its skin still hanging on it. With a shaking hand, he places it in the black cavity on the corpse's face. It fit perfectly, as though it was the corpse's original nose that had returned to it."[29] The text's dispassionate, gruesome descriptions of explosions and their aftermath, of severed body parts and their reassembly to form a new being leaking viscous fluids, is meant to elicit in the reader a sense of fear and repulsion, but simultaneously draws him/her into a sublime atmosphere of terror. This narration of terror through the supernatural, although stylistically a departure from the real, elicits horror in the reader precisely because while it takes him/her into a world of the unknown, the grotesque, and the supernatural, it nevertheless bridges this world with the familiar and the unsettling perceptions of the rational and the routine. Sa'dawi's dispassionate narrative style draws attention both to the routineness of unspeakable violence and the disturbing way that such horror can become routine.

With al-'Attag's addition of the nose, the corpse is complete, stitched together from the body parts of the victims of Baghdad's ubiquitous car bombs. Al-'Attag rationalizes his actions by telling himself that he "made it a complete corpse so that the body parts would not be discarded. . . so that it would be buried like the other dead and be properly respected."[30] His gruesome project, the reader learns, arises from a trauma of his own.

His friend and former roommate, Nahim 'Abdki, was killed while plying his trade pulling his horse-drawn carriage that sold used goods and electrical equipment in the streets of Baghdad. He and his horse were killed in an explosion that "mixed their flesh together."[31] Al-'Attag's project is thus a macabre effort to memorialize the dead by retrieving their body parts rather than letting them be swept away and discarded, forgotten forever. After completely assembling the corpse's parts and before he can give it a proper burial, al-'Attag leaves it unattended, and while he is gone, a vigorous storm envelops Baghdad. Upon his return home, the corpse is missing. In disbelief that the corpse has simply disappeared, al-'Attag wonders if it ever existed. He tells his impossible story to fellow customers at the Baghdad café he frequents, referring to the corpse he created as "Shisma" (what's its name). The corpse has risen, and its *raison d'etre* is to seek revenge on behalf of the victims of violence whose limbs and body parts make up the corporeal identity of the "Shisma." Declaring, "I am the answer to the cries of the forlorn," the corpse's mission resembles that of a superhero—to punish criminals and to "establish justice in the land at last."[32] The corpse appears throughout Baghdad, eluding both the police and a journalist who tracks events in the city involving a mysterious figure, the "Shisma," who is shot at but does not die. The resurrected corpse/monster becomes a national sensation for citizens weary of the lack of security and searching for someone, or something, to rescue them.

The corpse's honorable mission to seek revenge and to right past wrongs inevitably encounters moral quagmires. It soon realizes that it needs new body parts to keep functioning and seeks to acquire its new limbs and organs from the never-ending supply of Baghdad's bombings. Thus, the very existence of the corpse is contingent upon a perpetual cycle of violence that will provide it with its new parts. The corpse initially insists that the body parts must not come from criminals. It soon realizes, however, that its own body is already partly composed of the flesh of the very same types of criminals it is hunting. The honorable motives of the corpse shift as it questions the nature of criminality itself. In need of more and more parts to sustain itself, the corpse rationalizes the killing of innocents as necessary to replenish itself, killing an innocent man on the street for his eyeballs. The greater mission of delivering justice, the corpse suggests, requires these smaller acts of injustice toward the innocent.

Combining elements of a detective novel, a superhero comic, a supernatural thriller, and traditional gothic, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* brings together fundamental stylistic and thematic elements of the postcolonial gothic genre. In particular, the novel engages questions of national history and the return of the repressed through use of the supernatural, the uncanny, and the monstrous. More than simply a commentary on the haunting of the present by those unjustly killed, the corpse is a metaphor for the fragmented and injured nation. Its body composed of Iraqis from various sects and ethnicities, the characters in the novel see the "Shisma" as representing various incarnations of Iraqi identity. In one articulation, it represents the model Iraqi citizen, composed of the nation's many sectarian, ethnic, and religious groups harmoniously co-existing in one body. From its inception and during the years of the Hashemite monarchy, to the nationalist rulers who followed, the Iraqi government, tasked with fashioning a cohesive national space, has failed.[33] That this model citizen only exists in the form of a supernatural being is a commentary on the viability of Iraqi pluralism. Suggesting that the supernaturally created corpse is the ideal to which the reality of Iraq has failed to live up, the corpse thus serves as a metaphor for the failed national project, the monstrous incarnation of a colonial experiment gone awry. From another character's more hopeful perspective, in its unique combination of races, tribes, ethnicities, and social backgrounds, the corpse simultaneously represents an impossibility and an ideal, the "very first Iraqi citizen," an expression of nostalgia for an impossible contemporary Iraqi pluralism.[34] In constructing the corpse as a direct metaphor for the failure of Iraq as a political project, the novel nevertheless gestures toward the possibility of the nation's redemption. The realization by the corpse that it is partially composed of the bodies of criminals and its subsequent targeting of innocents to achieve its goal of delivering justice is a political critique of the logic of sectarianism. Stitched together from the body parts of Iraqis of various sects and charged with exacting revenge for their deaths, the corpse's quest for justice and thirst for new body parts will result in a never-ending cycle of violence if it pursues its mission of exacting revenge for past injustice committed against the victims that constitute its corporeal identity.

Madness and the Grotesque in Hassan Blasim's *"The Reality and the Record"*

Hassan Blasim's fiction offers bewildering, dark, surreal, and often grotesque depictions of Iraqi life amidst extreme violence. Like those of Antoon and Sa'dawi, Blasim's narrative style is calm and understated. The short story "al-Irshif wa al-Waqi'" (The Reality and the Record), from his collection *Majnun Sahat al-Hurriyya* (The Madman of Freedom Square) begins at a refugee center somewhere in Europe. The narrator explains that each refugee has a story he or she tells for the official records of the immigration department, but that the real stories remain locked in their hearts.[35] The various stories merge and it can be difficult to tell them apart. Blasim thus breaches the distinction between fact and fiction, and experience and imagination, at the start of the story. A refugee rapidly tells his story for the official record to a European immigration official: He was an ambulance driver directed to a crime scene beside the Tigris River, where police officers are standing around six headless corpses. The severed heads have been put in an empty flour sack; they are believed to belong to clerics of the "wrong" sect. As the ambulance driver transports the bodies and severed heads across town, a police car overtakes him. Four men in masks and police uniforms get out, and one points a gun at the narrator's face and kidnaps him. His co-kidnappers unload the sack of heads from the ambulance. The narrator's first thought is: "I've been kidnapped and they are going to cut off my head."[36] His kidnappers take him to a house that smells of grilled fish where he hears a child crying. His blindfold is removed and he finds himself in a cold, unfurnished room where he is beaten. The kidnappers force him to create a video in which he claims responsibility for beheading the bodies that were in his ambulance:

> A masked man came in with a video camera and a small computer. Then a boy came in with a small wooden table. The masked man joked with the boy, tweaked his nose and thanked him, then put the computer on the table and busied himself with setting up the camera in front of the black banner... the young man came back carrying the sack of heads which they had taken from the ambulance. Everyone covered his nose because of the stink from the sack. The fat man asked me to sit in front of the black banner... The one-eyed man took a small

> piece of paper from his pocket and asked me to read it. Meanwhile, the fat man was taking the decomposing heads out of the sack and lining them up in front of me. It said on the piece of paper that I was an officer in the Iraqi army and these were the heads of other officers, and that, accompanied by my fellow officers, I had raided houses, raped women, and tortured innocent civilians, that we had received orders to kill from a senior officer in the US Army, in return for large financial rewards.[37]

This passage is notable for how it constructs the nature of the grotesque spectacle as a staged event for media (and literary) consumption. As Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, the staging of violence, as with the "shock and awe" military campaign and the Abu Ghraib torture, requires the use of the imagination wherein the perpetrators of the violence, whether they are staging it in the name of civilization and progress or to confront and reconstitute this imperial logic, devise methods for the sake of its spectacular effects.[38] In Blasim's formulation, the grotesque spectacle is manufactured for a compliant media. Far from having a defined political logic, it is portrayed as a charade, a staging of falsehoods and a depraved manipulation lacking the ideological conviction that such acts are portrayed as representing. The narrator's release depends on the "success" of the tape, which is indeed successful because it is immediately broadcast on Al-Jazeera. "What made me angry," the narrator states, "was the Al-Jazeera broadcaster, who assured viewers that the channel had established through reliable sources that the tape was authentic and that the Ministry of Defense had admitted that the officers had gone missing."[39] The "truth" that the mass media delivers, Blasim asserts, is also a spectacular charade.

The narrator's success (his kidnappers call him a "great actor") does not lead to his release; he is sold to another armed group that beats him, shoves him in the trunk of their car, and drives him to the outskirts of Baghdad, where they hold him in a cattle pen and starve and humiliate him. This group repeats the actions of the first group, taping his admission that he now belongs to the Mahdi Army and is a famous killer, has cut off the heads of hundreds of Sunni men, and has received support from Iran. He is bought and sold repeatedly by different groups who use him and the same rotting, severed heads for their particular reasons.

> Throughout the year and a half of my kidnapping experience, I was moved from one hiding place to another. They shot video of me talking about how I was a treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, a Saudi terrorist, a Syrian Baathist intelligence agent, or a Revolutionary Guard from Zoroastrian Iran. On these videotapes I murdered, raped, started fires, planted bombs, and carried out crimes that no sane person could imagine."[40]

On his last assignment, he is forced to claim that he is an Afghan fighter. "Five men stood behind me and they brought in six men screaming and crying out for help from God, his prophet, and the prophet's family. They slaughtered the men in front of me like sheep as I announced that I was the new leader of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and made threats against everyone in creation."[41]

The story ends with the narrator telling the European refugee officer:

> I am asking for asylum in your country because of everyone. They are all killers and schemers—my wife, my children, my neighbors, my colleagues, God, his Prophet, the government, the newspapers. . They all told me I hadn't been away for a year and a half, because I came back the morning after working that rainy night. . . those six heads cannot be proof of what I'm saying, just as they are not proof that the night will not spread across the sky. Three days after this story was filed away in the records of the immigration department, they took the man who told it to the psychiatric hospital. Before the doctor could start asking him about his childhood memories, the ambulance driver summed up his real story in four words: "I want to sleep."[42]

The narrative ends in uncertainty—where does reality end and the imagination begin? Can the official record ever document the terror of such an experience? In other words, how can similar experiences of violence, torture, and horror ever be recorded and communicated? In this story, staging the spectacle of violence emphasizes its horror while simultaneously questioning the very possibility of its representation. The doubts we have about whether what has happened to the ambulance driver is "real" or not is, I suggest, a commentary on the impossibility of imagining the horrors of experiencing such violence. The reader is left once again disoriented and unsure of the

truth. It is certainly possible that the ambulance driver, with his profession forcing him to witness the aftermath of decapitation and torture, has not personally experienced what he claims and that his madness leads him to imagine these scenarios as a result of witnessing their aftermath, the dead bodies he picks up around Baghdad. Such an interpretation takes us once again to the effects of witnessing such violence; the residues of these acts of brutality cannot be swept away. They return in unexpected and horrific ways to intervene in and to haunt the present. The afterlives of violence become internalized in different ways—in dreams, in waking moments, and in madness. For Blasim, depicting the grotesque, in the form of an absurdist and surreal narration of decapitation and torture, introduces a nightmare vision of the postcolonial gothic that emphasizes the gruesome consequences of sectarian violence.

In Blasim's fiction, there is a pronounced engagement with questions of the political, in particular questions of sectarian conflict. Sectarianism is a political instrument rather than a fundamental, timeless component of Iraqi identity. The instrumentalization of sectarian identity by armed militias has less to do with a fervent belief than with a cynical and opportunistic exploitation of the political space that links power to such identities. There is also a sense of helplessness and confusion that surrounds attempts to make sense of the violence; who are the people who commit such acts and what are their motivations? And how did the social fabric of the nation disintegrate to such an extent that such violence could be so casually committed? The ambulance driver's desire at the end of the story to escape, to flee, and finally to sleep, suggests that the matter-of-fact macabre tale that he narrates to the immigration officer has also become the national experience. The chaos unleashed in Iraq after the US invasion, the various political forces competing to control fragments of the nation, the religious parties with their militias backed by foreign powers, the presence of death squads trained by the United States, the opportunistic sectarianism that may or may not be politically motivated, the kidnappings and beheadings and car bombs and torture unleashed on the general population, have become embedded in both personal experience and national identity. Blasim's stories, which focus not only on the post-2003 period but on the 1980s and 1990s as well, chronicle the impossibility of making rational sense of such brutality, but simultaneously historicize the past, from the Saddam Hussein years through

the 1990s to the US invasion and its consequences.

This historical sensibility is manifested in "The Reality and the Record" by the return of the repressed—for the refugee, it is the official necessity of recounting the horrors of the past to the immigration official in order to escape Iraq. The unspeakable horrors he has experienced, the story suggests, must still be spoken. The inconclusiveness, confusion, ambiguousness, and lack of resolution that attend the narrative are fundamental stylistic characteristics of the postcolonial gothic genre, which "remains open, ambiguous, and emphasizes the unsolvable nature of political and historical conflicts."[43] Mirroring and intervening in the chaos of reality, the macabre horror of the postcolonial gothic gestures toward the impossibility of a rational conclusion to the social and political turbulence it represents.

Staging the Violent Spectacle: Psychological Horror in Luay Hamza Abbas' "Closing His Eyes"

Lu'ay Hamza 'Abbas' short story collection *Ighmad al-'Aynayn* (translated as *Closing His Eyes*) is a meditation on the devastating impact of violence on the psyche—its residue lingering and affecting the everyday, its stories alternating between the dark and shocking to the quietly chilling.[44] In the short story *Rajul Kathir al-Asfar* (translated as *A Much Traveled Man*), violence is narrated in an understated but intensely macabre fashion. The story begins with a man asking the narrator: "What are you thinking these days?" The story's narrator responds in the first person that he would like to write a story about a man who travels frequently between Baghdad and Basra for work. On one of the man's trips, a few kilometers before entering Baghdad, he is "slaughtered on the roadside. Just like that, for no reason. . . This is the story's paradox, because the man continues to see even after his murderers depart."[45] Like the dream sequence in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, where the decapitated protagonist sees his own body lying in a puddle of blood, 'Abbas' protagonist imagines his character living through his own death. The character's corpse is left among other corpses in which "the heads are severed from the bodies. Some heads have gaping eyes, and a thick white film begins to cover them."[46] Despite his own death, the man continues to see the dead, decapitated bodies surrounding him.

At this point, the story abruptly shifts in tone and perspective, narrated from the perspective of the murdered man rather than the narrator. The story continues:

> He opened his eyes as the taste of brackish earth intensified in his mouth. He put his hands on the ground and stood up. In his head, which had not been severed from his body, the voices still resounded, mingling with the groans of the bodies as they were being slaughtered. . . He shook off the dust from his clothes and then wiped his face and neck and began to walk, astonished by the lightness of his body and the length of his stride. He could feel his body becoming freer as his pain subsided. His feet did not touch the ground as he moved forward, while the cars zoomed by and their passengers gaped in disbelief at his uninterrupted walk along the middle of the road.[47]

The narrative leap into the body of the murdered man moves the story into the realm of the supernatural, away from the voice of the narrator and into direct experience. This abrupt shift disorients the reader and complicates the narrative structure. The story's bewildering movement extends to the events he is narrating—although the story declares that the murdered man has not been decapitated, by the end of the story we learn that he has a wound on his neck, suggesting that he may have been decapitated like the bodies around him. On his journey home, he moves rapidly down the highway, faster than the cars traveling between Basra and Baghdad, liberated and freed from the pain of his murder. When he arrives, he walks through the front door and hears his wife cooking in the kitchen. She hears him enter and asks, "Are you back, darling?" Not answering her, he goes directly to his bedroom, methodically undresses and rests on his bed. The story ends: "The cut on his neck looks closer in hue to black. His wife enters the room with the smells of food still clinging to her clothes. She looks toward him and is terrified as she finds him staring at the ceiling, a thick white film beginning to cover his eyes."[48] The macabre quality of this narrative combined with its disorienting shift in perspective raises a questions about the plot itself—has the narrator, who had imagined the story of the murdered man, been killed? What does the shift in perspective to the consciousness of the murdered man signify? Has he been decapitated in life only to be whole again in the afterlife?

The shift in perspective from the storyteller to the murdered man moves the story into the realm of the unreal. Supernatural elements are manifested to narrate the experience of wrongful death ("being slaughtered for no reason") and to situate the murdered man as the protagonist rather than simply a product of the narrator's voice. The narrative situates the dead man, through depicting his afterlife, as living beyond his death in order to linger on his experience and his fate rather than focus on what it means for the living to witness death. The use of the supernatural again intervenes to resurrect the dead and to depart from the mundane reality of atrocities in Iraq—naturalized to such an extent that mass slaughter is routine. At the end of the story, the murdered man's fate is that of the other victims, with a "thick white film beginning to cover his eyes." The surreal and uncanny aspect of this story—the dead man's awakening after his death and his rapid travel on foot from Baghdad to Basra—introduces the supernatural in the form of a post-violent haunting of the real. The indeterminacy of the narrative, with its focus on disembodied experience, echoes the symbolic meaning articulated in Antoon's initial scene with which I began this article. Rendering these extreme scenes of violence, whose brutality exceeds the power of realistic depiction, requires the use of aesthetic strategies where the spectacle of murder is not the central focus. For both Antoon and 'Abbas, the function of disembodiment is to depict such horror through the use of the supernatural precisely in order to register its horrors.

The title story of the collection, *Closing His Eyes*, is not a story of the supernatural. Rather, it narrates the relationship between the real and the metaphysical in its portrayal of the assimilation of witnessing violence into the subconscious. It tells the story of a man who bicycles to his job as a cashier at a health center, narrating his monotonous tasks at work—directing patients to the right doctors, collecting fees, and organizing files. The highlights of his days are the moments in which he escapes reality by closing his eyes, transported to a world of calm and peace. "He would ride close to the pavement waiting for the cars to clear out of the way so he could close his eyes and let the world recede. . . that momentary state, once it descended upon him, would fill him with a rare sense of happiness that would last him the whole day."[49] As he fulfills his mundane work tasks, he treasures the moments of escape when he closes his eyes and the world recedes around him. As his workday proceeds, his gaze falls across the window to an empty

field, where he observes the following scene that concludes the story:

> This time he saw a white car approach slowly and park in the middle of the field. He guessed that the car had broken down, and waited for the driver to get out and open the hood. He got out indeed, but did not walk toward the hood. He leaned against the door and pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He took out a cigarette, lit it, and began smoking. Two men got out of the car after him. One of them put his hand on the shoulder of the other, who was blindfolded, while pushing him toward the driver, who took hold of the man and forced him violently to his knees. At that moment the health center cashier sensed the warmth of his teacup. He placed it back on the table and withdrew his hand, surprised by its trembling. He resumed his watching. One of the two men pulled out a gun and shot the blindfolded man three times in the head. On his way home, the cashier closed his eyes. He continued pedaling as the crown thinned out in the streets around him. Unusually, he did not feel himself move in his grey darkness, and did not wonder about his distant blur of light. Closing his eyes this time, there was the hand jerking back at each shot and the head convulsing.[50]

The violence witnessed by the cashier—its routine, public nature—is juxtaposed with his mundane, monotonous tasks. In the staging of this violent spectacle, the cashier is a voyeur, watching the execution take place before him unbeknownst to the victim and the victimizers. The only sign that he is disturbed by the events unfolding before his eyes is his trembling hand, which surprises him, as though prior encounters with such violence have not had such an effect. In this scene, the violent spectacle is staged so that both the main character and reader witness an execution simultaneously, thereby rendering both parties voyeurs and witnesses to the horror unfolding before them. The understated third-person narration is measured and minimalist, with little dramatic effect. This minimalism magnifies the thematic emphasis on the routine nature of violence in Iraq, which has the paradoxical effect of drawing more attention to the ways in which spectators of the violence in Iraq, including the reader, have been numbed to its effects.

The violence the protagonist witnesses infiltrates the one place immune to the daily patterns surrounding him—the receding world of solitude in

his subconscious that is his escape when he closes his eyes. Violence not only alters the physical body, but its pervasiveness and its public display penetrates the subconscious, and even those places of refuge that the protagonist creates as an escape are, in the end, colonized by the effects of the violence he witnesses. The subconscious becomes the metaphysical playground for enacting the residue of daily violence. Unlike the opening scene of Antoon's *The Corpse Washer,* which relays a dream sequence to the reader in which the residue of witnessed violence colonizes one's sleep, for the anonymous protagonist of 'Abbas' short story, the violent spectacle has invaded his only waking refuge.

Conclusion

The narratives of Sa'dawi, Blasim, and 'Abbas are tied together stylistically and thematically through their use of the fantastic, uncanny, and supernatural to portray gruesome spectacles of violence in Iraq, narrating the unspeakable through an aesthetic of horror. The afterlives of the horrors they depict—decapitations, torture, shootings, and explosions—manifest themselves through hauntings, whether in nightmares, the subconscious, madness, or the monstrous. These gothic literary elements have appeared in Iraqi fiction precisely at the historical moment of Iraq's possible fragmentation as a state. As a genre, the postcolonial gothic intervenes at these moments of national crisis, mobilizing the supernatural to interrupt the status quo, to give voice to silenced or buried historical narratives, and to expose the historical genealogies of the present. The nightmare visions articulated in this fiction stage violence through spectacular returns of the suppressed historical past to haunt the present and through reanimation of the voices and experiences of the dead. Sa'dawi's reanimated corpse, a sectarian mélange of body parts, represents the frightening return of the dead, unjustly killed and improperly mourned. Blasim's mad ambulance driver recounts a tale of simultaneously believable and unbelievable brutality in which his only companions are the severed heads of the victims of Iraq's civil strife. The "record" of his tale, however, can never approach the realities of its horrors. And the murdered, perhaps decapitated, afterlife of 'Abbas' character resurrects the dead in order to linger on the spectacle of his murder, staging a separation between embodied and disembodied violence. These narratives

form a new corpus of the postcolonial gothic, drawing on the traditional elements of gothic literature and situating them in the particular experiences of post-war Iraq. As a genre of literature especially attuned to questions of the historical, the postcolonial gothic functions to resurrect aspects of the colonial experience that have been silenced. The persistent haunting of the present that structures the narratives discussed in this paper suggests that the literary function of these postcolonial gothic texts is to draw attention to the continued lack of accountability for the violence visited upon Iraqis.

ENDNOTES

1 Sinan Antoon, *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya lil-Dirasat wal-Nashr, 2010). Translated by the author as *The Corpse Washer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

2 Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 2

3 Shelley Rice. "Domestic Tension: An Interview with Wafaa Bilal by Shelley Rice." Le Magazine: Jeu De Paume. 1 October 2012. http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org/blogs/shelleyrice/2012/10/01/domestic-tension-an-interview-with-wafaa-bilal-by-shelley-rice/.

4 Ibid.

5 A recent example of this attempt to come to terms with Iraq's present situation through exploring its three decades of war and sanctions is Muhsin al-Ramli's *Hada'iq al-Ra'is* (2012) (The President's Gardens), which addresses the era of Saddam Hussein's brutality and authoritarianism as well as the effects of the US occupation of Iraq and the sectarian conflict that followed.

6 Notable novels that address the condition of exile include Shakir Nuri's *Kilab Jiljamesh* (2008) (The Dogs of Gilgamesh), and 'Abd al-Hadi Sa'dun's *Mudhakkirat Kalb 'Iraqi* (2012) (Memories of an Iraqi Dog). Novels that seek to reconstruct and reimagine the Iraqi past include Mahmud Sa'id's nostalgic *al-Dunya fi 'Ayin al-Mala'ika: Riwaya* (2006) (The World Through the Eyes of Angels), which depicts a multi-ethnic Mosul during the 1940s, and 'Ali Badr's *Haris al-Tabgh* (2008) (The Tobacco Keeper) which traces Baghdad's lost Jewish identity. Notable texts depicting American occupation soldiers include Shakir al-Anbari's *Bilad Sa'ida* (2008) (Happy Country), in which vivid descriptions of American soldiers and their equipment and behavior are narrated in a graphic, unfiltered style utilizing a straightforward realist aesthetic. In'am Kachachi's *al-Hafida al-Amrikiyya* (2008) (The American Granddaughter) also depicts American troops, telling the story of an Iraqi-American woman who is part of the invasion force and must reconcile her identity as an American with her desire to have a relationship with her grandmother in Baghdad.

7 Yasmeen Hanoosh. "Beyond the Trauma of War: Iraqi Literature Today." Words Without Borders. http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/beyond-the-trauma-of-war-iraqi-literature-today.

8 As a subgenre of postcolonial theory, critics have located literary manifestations of the postcolonial gothic to a wide range of texts from varying geographies and histories, including the slave plantations of the Caribbean and the American south, the struggles of indigenous peoples from the Americas to Australia and New Zealand, the apartheid system in South Africa, and legacies of British colonial rule in South Asia and the Middle East. See, for example, Howard L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Alison Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); David McInnnis, "Re-Orienting the Gothic Romance: Jean Rhys, Tayeb Salih, and Strategies of Representation in the Postcolonial Gothic," *ARIEL* 39, no. 3 (2008), 85-105; Gerald Gaylard, "The Postcolonial Gothic: Time and Death in Southern African Literature," *Journal of Literary Studies* 24, no. 4 (2008), 1-18; Jack Shear, "Haunted House, Haunted Nation: Triomf and the South African Postcolonial Gothic," *Journal of Literary Studies* 22, no. 1-2 (2006), 70-95; *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires: Dark Blood*, Eds. Tabish Khair and Johan Hoglund (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

9 Walter Scott, "Introduction to the Castle of Otranto," in *Horace Walpole: The Critical Heritage*, Ed. Peter Sabor (London: Routledge, 1987), 91.

10 Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 2.

11 Ibid., 3.
12 Fred Botting, *The Gothic* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 2
13 Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Ed. Jerold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229.
14 Ibid.
15 See, for example, Stephen D. Orata, "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization," *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990), 621-645.
16 Ibid., 234.
17 Ibid., 233.
18 Julie Hakim Azzam, "The Alien Within: Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Home," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2007, 2.
19 Ibid., 32.
20 Ibid., 4-5, 33-4.
21 Ibid., 7, 36.
22 Robert J. C. Young, "Terror Effects," in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, Eds. Elleke Boehmer, Stephen Morton (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 310.
23 Chris Hedges. "The Ghoulish Face of Empire." Truthdig Main News. June 23, 2014. http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_ghoulish_face_of_empire_20140623.
24 Ahmad Sa'dawi, *Frankishtayn fi Baghdad* (Baghdad/Beirut: Manshurat al-Jamal, 2013). All translations are mine.
25 Ibid., 28.
26 Ibid., 27.
27 Ibid., 29.
28 Ibid., 33-4.
29 Ibid., 34.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 32.
32 Ibid., 156-7.
33 Ibid., 160-1.
34 Ibid., 161.
35 Hassan Blasim, *The Madman of Freedom Square*, trans. Jonathan Wright (Manchester: Comma Press, 2009).
36 Ibid., 4.
37 Ibid., 6.
38 Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Invisible Empire: Abu Ghraib and Embodied Spectacle," *Visual Arts Research*, 32, no. 2 (2006), 41.
39 Blasim, 7.
40 Ibid., 10.
41 Ibid., 10.
42 Ibid., 11.
43 Azzam, "The Alien Within: Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Home," 34.
44 Lu'ay Hamza 'Abbas, *Igmad al-'Aynayn* (Amman: Azminah, 2008). Translated by Yasmeen Hanoosh as *Closing His Eyes* (London: Moment Digibooks Limited, 2013). I will be citing from Hanoosh's translation.
45 Ibid., 27.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 28.
49 Ibid., 24.
50 Ibid., 25-6.