



Al-Ḥafrah: A Narratological Analysis of Ḥasan Blāsim's Short Story from Brian McHale's Perspective

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Abstract

This article tried to investigate the short story “al-Ḥafrah” written by Ḥasan Blāsim under the framework of the theory of postmodernist fiction proposed by Brian McHale’s. “Al-Ḥafrah” portrays the condition of a main character who escapes from conflict and falls into a hole. This hole bridges multiple realities and becomes the center of the story’s absurd narration. By employing McHale’s theoretical framework, this article seeks to construct the narrative structure of “al-Ḥafrah.” This article results in three major concepts of postmodernist fiction. First world pluralism represents a heterocosmic unity between the space of conflict, the space of silence, and the space of technology. Second, space construction and deconstruction simultaneously happen through three strategies: juxtaposing Iraq and Finland spatially, and juxtaposing the Abbasid era, World War II, the post-Saddam period, and the technological era temporally; interpolating the hole as an unknown space between known places and historical periods; and misattributing the hole by assigning attributes that should not belong to it. Third the recursive structure produces strange narrative loops through a hypodiegetic mechanism that generates new objects from older ones. These three anti-realist concepts dominantly highlight the ontological problems in “al-Ḥafrah,” which disrupt the nature of reality and become an antithesis to realist literature.

Keywords: “Al-Ḥafrah”; postmodernist fiction; narratology

INTRODUCTION

The short story “al-Ḥafrah” is one of the works included in the short story anthology *Ma’raḍ al-Juṣaʿ* by Ḥasan Blāsim. This short story represents an anthology containing stories about Iraq and is written using horror and absurd narratives (Nair, 2025:5-9; Fox, 2023:43-56; Golden, 2021:259-291). It is set against the backdrop of conflict, following the main character who loots a warehouse while fleeing from an ambush by three armed masked men. His escape eventually leads him into a hole located at the edge of the garden near the Natural History Museum. The hole becomes a site for the reconstruction of the world’s ontology within the narrative, as it facilitates encounters and repetitions of multiple realities. From a postmodern perspective, the reconstruction of the world’s ontology within the hole is narratively manifested through the protagonist’s encounters with several realities occurring simultaneously in absurd and anti-realist ways. Therefore, the short story “al-Ḥafrah” is relevant to be examined through the framework of postmodern fiction theory.

Postmodern fiction theory provides an ontological and epistemological framework for understanding the narratology of literary works influenced by postmodern thought. The theory is grounded in the proposition concerning the collapse of the ontology of a single and absolute truth within postmodern discourse (Dillard, 1982). In contrast, modern thought, which preceded



postmodernism and later became its antithesis, was founded upon the principle of universality, thereby generating the belief that reality is singular (McHale, 1987:xii). Based on the principles of universality and the assumption of an absolute and singular reality, literary works in the modern era primarily functioned to uncover epistemological issues. However, with the collapse of the ontology of a singular and absolute reality in the postmodern era, a pluralistic, anarchic world culture emerged, characterized by secondary truths that are more uncertain than any absolute truth. Such a condition suggests that the world has fallen into disorder and lost its direction. This condition significantly influences the narratives of postmodern fiction. These narratives are anti-realist in nature because they simultaneously connect multiple worlds, construct and deconstruct spaces, and even reproduce realities, thereby generating ontological instability (Ibsch, 1982:98:113; Leclair and McCaffery, 1983). The anti-realism itself conceptually functions as an antithesis to realist literary thought. Realist literature, or the tradition of literary realism, emphasizes the depiction of the real world in a realistic manner by presenting symbols that likewise exist within reality itself (Selim, 2003:109). This characteristic can be observed in the short story “Ṭabliyyah min as-Samā` ” by Yūsuf Idrīs (Farhah and Jannah, 2021:157), the short story “ar-Raqīq al-Abyaḍ” by Najīb al-Kilānī (Umam, 2022:223), the novel *Ṣulāṣiyyat Garnāḥah* by Raḍwā ‘Āsyūr (Wardah and Yoyo, 2022:237), the short story “al-Qamīṣ al-Masrūq” by Ghassan Kanafani (Izazi and Nashiruddin, 2024:13), and even the novels *‘Āzif al-Guyūm* and *al-Kāfirah* by ‘Alī Badr (Najmaldin and Hassan, 2025:1064), who shares a similar Iraqi background with Ḥasan Blāsim. In contrast, anti-realism portrays the conditions of the real world in an abstract manner while disregarding the boundaries of plausibility that govern reality.

In brief, anti-realism constitutes the final conclusion derived from the synthesis of postmodern fiction concepts. Such strategies aim to re-examine the world’s lost and chaotic direction through what Higgins terms the “post-cognitive” strategy. This strategy functions to address questions such as: “Which world is this?”, “What is to be done in it?”, and “Which of my selves is to do it?” (Higgins, 1978) These conditions correspond closely to those represented in “al-Ḥafrah” by Ḥasan Blāsim. Consequently, McHale’s formulation of postmodern fiction theory constitutes an appropriate analytical framework for reconstructing the narrative presented in the story.

Based on the background outlined above, this study focuses specifically on the narrative structure of the short story “al-Ḥafrah”. This focus gives rise to the following research question: how is the narrative construction in the short story “al-Ḥafrah” configured?

Related the previous research, the narrative analysis of “al-Ḥafrah” by Ḥasan Blāsim is conducted using McHale’s theory of postmodern fiction. Based on an examination of studies employing postmodern fiction theory, it is evident that McHale’s ideas were utilized by Czerniakowski (2013) in a study examining representations of masculinity in the metafictional novels of John Banville. The study concluded that the fictionality and intertextuality of those novels were shaped by two primary factors: the manifestation of the creative imagination of the author and narrator, and the self-awareness of the character Rheticus. McHale’s theory was also employed by Kula (2016) in an analysis of representations of contemporary society in the urban fantasy novel *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman. Through McHale’s juxtaposition method applied to the novel’s semiotic symbols, the study revealed disparities between London Above and London Below, particularly in terms of materialistic thinking and higher moral values. Furthermore, the theory was applied by Insani (2024) in a study investigating the characteristics of postmodern

poetics in the novel *Kereta Semar Lembu* by Zaky Yamani. The findings demonstrated that the novel exhibits postmodern poetic characteristics in the form of plurality.

Studies on contemporary Iraqi and Middle Eastern fiction have highlighted themes of war, displacement, fragmentation, and narrative experimentation. Fox (2022) examines horrific refugee experiences in Blāsim's fiction, while Nair (2025) explores representations of conflict in *The Corpse Exhibition*. Research on Middle Eastern narrative fiction has also emphasized alternative forms of realism and postmodern experimentation in Arabic literature. However, narratological studies employing McHale's framework remain limited in the context of Iraqi fiction, particularly regarding *al-Ḥafrah*.

Existing studies have examined postmodern narrative in European and Indonesian literary texts; however, no study has specifically analyzed Ḥasan Blāsim's short story *al-Ḥafrah* through Brian McHale's narratological framework. Therefore, this study fills this gap by providing the first focused narratological analysis of *al-Ḥafrah* using McHale's concepts of world pluralism, construction/deconstruction of space, recursive structure, and anti-realism.

Therefore, based on the three previous studies discussed above, the distinguishing aspects of the present study lie in both its material object and the depth of analysis. The short story "al-Ḥafrah," as the material object of this research, has not previously been examined. Moreover, no prior study has explored and employed McHale's concepts in a more comprehensive and in-depth manner. Therefore, this study aims to reconstruct the narrative of "al-Ḥafrah" through the concepts of postmodern fiction proposed by McHale. This aim gives rise to the following research question: how is the narrative construction in the short story "al-Ḥafrah" configured?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

McHale's framework in this study consists of four concepts: (1) world pluralism, (2) construction and deconstruction of space, (3) recursive structure, and (4) anti-realism. The first three concepts function as narrative mechanisms, while anti-realism serves as the overarching postmodern condition produced by those mechanisms.

The first is world pluralism. This concept not only acknowledges that the world is constituted by multiple realities and cultures, but also affirms the interconnection between universes or worlds within a narrative, referred to as "the zone" (McHale, 1987:27).

The second concept concerns the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of space. These processes signify the existence of heterotopia, a space situated between the realm of expectation or utopia and the realm of disorder or dystopia (Foucault, 1986:22-27). In relation to these processes, McHale proposes several strategies: juxtaposing spaces that are geographically distant in reality, interpolating or inserting unfamiliar and new spaces between two previously known spaces, and severing the relationship between a space and its inherent attributes before replacing them with alternative attributes (McHale, 1987:45).

Brian McHale's theory of postmodernist fiction emphasizes ontological instability, plurality of worlds, and anti-realist narrative structures. These features are particularly relevant to Ḥasan Blāsim's *al-Ḥafrah*, a short story in which a mysterious hole connects multiple realities, historical

periods, and identities. Because the narrative repeatedly disrupts conventional boundaries of space and reality, it provides a suitable object for postmodern narratological analysis.

At last, the final concept is recursive structure. This structure reproduces reality through the creation of a hypodiegetic world, which Douglas Hofstadter defines as a world existing one level beneath the primary world within a literary work (Hofstadter, 1979:103-127). Within the hypodiegetic world, ontological conversion, or world conversion, takes place, whereby new objects emerge from prior narratives containing objects that disrupt the direction of the narrative itself (McHale, 1987:112-113). These concepts collectively point toward the objective of constructing anti-realist postmodern narratives. Fundamentally, anti-realism constitutes the essential characteristic of postmodern narrative (McHale, 1987:227). This characteristic is inherently attached to postmodern narrative and simultaneously functions as the distinguishing feature separating it from narratives influenced by modernist thought (McHale, 1987:xii). In addition to being inherent within postmodern narrative, this anti-realist quality also gives rise to the other concepts proposed by Mchale, namely world pluralism, simultaneous construction and deconstruction, and recursive structure. This demonstrates that Mchale's fiction theory functions as an analytical instrument for uncovering the anti-realist narrative dimensions within "al-Ḥafrah" by Ḥasan Blāsim.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary data source is the original Arabic version of al-Ḥafrah published in Ma'raḍ al-Juṣaṣ by Ḥasan Blāsim (2015). English translations are used only for quotation and explanatory purposes, while the analysis is based primarily on the Arabic text. Al-Ḥafrah was selected because it prominently depicts ontological uncertainty through a narrative structure that connects different spaces, historical periods, and realities. These characteristics make it particularly suitable for analysis using Mchale's postmodernist framework.

Data were collected through close reading and textual analysis of the short story. Passages relevant to Mchale's concepts were identified, coded, and categorized according to their narrative function. Sudaryanto (2015) quotes that the listening-noting technique is used for library research, as the researcher is not engaged in any conversation. The technique is carried out by reading and listening to the short story as data source, then noting down the parts that become data on a data card.

The analytical procedure in this study consists of three principal stages. The first stage involves classifying the data according to the conceptual frameworks proposed within Mchale's theory. The second stage consists of briefly explaining the data within each conceptual framework and analyzing them through the correlation between literary evidence and theoretical concepts. The final stage involves formulating provisional conclusions within each conceptual category before proceeding to the next concept or arriving at the overall conclusion.

Mchale's framework is suitable for this study because it specifically focuses on ontological problems, which constitute the central narrative characteristic of *al-Ḥafrah*. The framework enables systematic identification of narrative elements that construct postmodern worlds and destabilize reality.

For example, passages depicting the hole as a connection between Iraq and Finland were categorized under juxtaposition and interpolation before being interpreted as manifestations of ontological instability.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main finding of research regarding the anti-realist dimension was find within “al-Ḥafrah” short story by Ḥasan Blāsim. The section represents the final conclusion derived from the synthesis of postmodern fiction concepts. These concepts include world pluralism, the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of worlds, and recursive structure. The concise results of the discussion concerning these three concepts in the short story “al-Ḥafrah” are presented in the following table.

Name	Subconcept	Brief Description
World Pluralism	-	A plurality of universes or heterocosms that are interconnected with one another
Construction and Deconstruction of the World Simultaneously	Juxtaposition	Positioning spaces that are not actually adjacent in reality as though they existed side by side
	Interpolation	Insertion of a foreign space between two spaces already recognized within reality
	Misattribution	Removal of attributes inherently associated with a particular space and their arbitrary replacement with alternative attributes
Recursive Structure	-	Existence of a world beneath another world within the narrative

World Pluralism

World pluralism constitutes one of the narrative methods of postmodernism in revealing the workings and conditions of the world. This method does not perceive a singular world through the multiplicity of worldviews; rather, it conceives of a plurality of universes or heterocosms that are interconnected with one another (McHale, 1987:27). McHale refers to this plurality of interconnected universes within a single narrative framework as “the zone.” The zone is represented through the narrative of the protagonist’s encounters with multiple realities within a hole. This narrative is illustrated in the following excerpt.

وما إن بلغت نهاية الحديقة من جهة بناية متحف التاريخ الطبيعي سقطت في حفرة هناك....
 - إسمع ... لا تخف!
 أفز عني صوته المبحوح.
 - من أنت؟
 سألته والخوف يشلني.
 . هل شعرت بالم؟
 لا...
 أمر إعتيادي. انها السلسلة

(Blāsim, 2015:131)

As soon as I reached the far end of the garden near the Natural History Museum building, I fell into a hole.

“Listen, don’t be afraid!” His hoarse voice startled me.

“Who are you?” I asked, as fear paralyzed my body.

"Are you in pain?"

"No."

"That is only natural. It is the chain."

The excerpt demonstrates the encounter between the protagonist, who simultaneously functions as the narrator, and the inhabitant of the hole into which he falls near the garden of the Natural History Museum building. This encounter occurs when the protagonist enters the hole while attempting to escape from the ambush carried out by three armed masked men. Within the narrative, the inhabitant of the hole is portrayed as an elderly figure experienced in dealing with individuals who fall into the place he inhabits. Furthermore, the old man is depicted as a jinn. He occupies a world that is peaceful, yet bleak and underdeveloped. In contrast, the protagonist is portrayed as a human being originating from an environment permeated by life-threatening circumstances. The world from which he comes is highly dynamic, yet simultaneously endangers its inhabitants. The encounter between the protagonist and the inhabitant of the hole signifies a zone of interconnection between two worlds: the human world, which is dynamic yet threatening to its inhabitants, and the world of the jinn, which is static yet bleak and underdeveloped.

In addition to the encounter between the protagonist's world and the world of the elderly inhabitant of the hole, another encounter occurs between the world of the hole and the world of a Russian soldier. This encounter is represented through the story narrated by the inhabitant of the hole in the following excerpt.

قلت له إنني أعرف كل أسرار حياته. ولكي أزيد من خوفه قلت إنني أعرف نيكولاي، أصغر أولاد عمته اضطرب الجندي حين سمع الاسم. تكلمت عن اغتصابه ونيكولاي لفتاة في القرية. انهارت أعصابه وأطلق الرصاصة على رأسي. إنها سلسلة تافهة محشوة بقصصنا البشرية.

(Blāsim, 2015:136)

"I told him that I knew every secret of his life. To deepen his terror, I told him that I even knew about Nikolai, the youngest son of his aunt. He trembled the moment he heard the name. I spoke of how he and Nikolai had violated a village girl. His nerves collapsed. He fired the bullet into my head. All of this was nothing more than a trivial chain woven from the stories of us humans."

The excerpt illustrates the encounter between the inhabitant of the hole and a Russian soldier who falls into the hole in a forest during the Winter War between Russia and Finland. Within this zone, the Russian soldier originates from a region affected by the Winter War between Russia and Finland. This indicates that he belongs to the era of World War II, since the armed conflict between Russia and Finland that took place during the period of the Winter War occurred within the broader context of the Second World War. In contrast, the inhabitant of the hole is portrayed as a resident of a dark and tranquil world, yet one possessing extraordinarily extensive knowledge that ultimately terrifies the Russian soldier. The encounter between these two figures signifies the interconnection of two worlds: the world of conflict in Europe and the dark world of the Middle East that transcends ordinary epistemic boundaries.

When compared, a distinction emerges between the encounter involving the world of conflict in Russia and Finland with the world of the hole and the encounter involving the world of conflict in Iraq and the world of the hole. This distinction is referred to by McHale as "forking paths," namely the simultaneous manifestation of divergent futures within a narrative (McHale, 1987:107). This

manifestation is represented through the contradictory behavior of the inhabitant of the hole in his encounters with the protagonist and with the Russian soldier. In his encounter with the Russian soldier, the inhabitant of the hole threatens him, ultimately causing the soldier to die of fear. Conversely, in his encounter with the protagonist, the inhabitant of the hole is portrayed as being concerned about the protagonist's condition. This contrast is striking, considering that both the Russian soldier and the protagonist originate from the same world, namely the world of conflict. Ultimately, the world pluralism formed by the world of the hole and the world of conflict generates different futures for the two characters: the protagonist survives, whereas the Russian soldier dies.

Construction and Deconstruction of the World Simultaneously

The simultaneous construction and deconstruction of worlds occurs within the realm of heterotopia. Foucault (1986:22-27) defines heterotopia as a third space situated beyond utopia, the space of expectation, and dystopia, the space of disorder, containing contradictory elements that enable it to exist despite its apparent irrationality. In other words, in constructing and simultaneously deconstructing the heterotopic world, McHale grounds his framework in the spatial concepts derived from Foucault's thought. Based on this foundation, McHale proposes several strategies for the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of space: juxtaposition, namely the placement of spaces that are not contiguous in reality as though they were adjacent; interpolation, or the insertion of foreign spaces into the midst of spaces already recognized within the real world; and misattribution, which severs the relationship between a space and the attributes inherently attached to it before replacing them with alternative attributes (McHale, 1987:46).

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition constitutes the first strategy within postmodern narrative. This strategy is carried out by positioning spaces that are not actually adjacent in reality as though they existed side by side. Such juxtaposition is illustrated in the following excerpt.

صحيح هو جندي روسي.
قرأ أفكاره وعلى وجهه ابتسامة متكلفة.
وما كان يفعله في بلدنا عمل في السفارة؟
سقط في الغابة أثناء الحرب الشتوية بين روسيا وفنلندا....
أنت مجنون حقاً!

(Blāsim, 2015:133)

"That's right. He was a Russian soldier."

He, the Old Man, read my thoughts and gave a faint, hollow grin.

"Then what was he doing in our country? Working at the embassy?"

"He fell into the forest during the Winter War between Russia and Finland."

"You really are insane!"

The excerpt demonstrates narrative juxtaposition in terms of space. It is evident that both the protagonist and the old man who fall into the hole originate from Iraq. However, the Russian soldier who falls into a forest located between Russia and Finland arrives at the very same hole. In reality, these two regions are separated by a distance of approximately three thousand two hundred kilometers. This condition indicates the existence of an anti-realist spatial juxtaposition

within the narrative, since the two spaces should not logically be aligned or positioned adjacent to one another.

In addition to spatial juxtaposition, juxtaposition also encompasses temporal dimensions or historical eras that should not ordinarily coexist side by side. This condition is illustrated in the following excerpt.

قبل تركه الحفرة أخبرني العجوز أنه من بغداد وعاش في زمن الخلافة العباسية. كان معلماً ومؤلفاً ومخترعاً. اقترح على الخليفة إضاءة أزقة المدينة بالقناديل. وكان قد أشرف قبلها على إضاءة المساجد. لصوص بغداد انزعجوا من قناديله طاردوه بعد صلاة الفجر. وكان مشغولاً بتوسيع خطة إضاءة المنازل بطرق حديثة. وعلى مقربة من داره تعثر صاحب القناديل بثوبه وسقط في الحفرة

(Blāsim, 2015:137)

Before leaving the hole, the Old Man told me that he had come from Baghdad and had lived during the era of the Abbasid Caliphate. He had been a teacher, a writer, and an inventor. He once proposed to the caliph that the city's alleys be lit with lanterns. Before that, he had overseen the lighting of the mosques. The thieves of Baghdad were disturbed by his lanterns and pursued him after the dawn prayer. At the time, he was deeply occupied with expanding his plans to illuminate houses by modern means. Not far from his home, the keeper of lanterns stumbled over his robes and fell into the hole.

The excerpt demonstrates narrative juxtaposition in terms of time. Within the narrative, the elderly inhabitant of the hole is said to originate from the Abbasid Caliphate era. This period came to an end in the thirteenth century. In contrast, the protagonist of the story originates from the era of conflict and terrorism in Iraq, a period that began following the topple of Saddam Hussein in the early twenty-first century (Susilowati, et. al., 2018:1-10). In reality, these two eras are separated by approximately seven centuries. This condition indicates the juxtaposition of two anti-realist temporalities, since the two periods should not logically coexist side by side. Furthermore, the separation within the narrative is connected through an interpolation.

Interpolation

Interpolation constitutes the second strategy in the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of narrative space. Interpolation refers to the insertion of a foreign space between two spaces already recognized within reality (McHale, 1987:46). This interpolation is clearly represented in the following excerpt.

صحيح هو جندي روسي.
قرأ أفكارى وعلى وجهه ابتسامة متكلفة.
وما كان يفعل في بلدنا عمل في السفارة؟
سقط في الغابة أثناء الحرب الشتوية بين روسيا وفنلندا
(Blāsim, 2015:133)

"That's right. He was a Russian soldier."

He, the Old Man, read my thoughts and gave a faint, hollow grin.

"Then what was he doing in our country? Working at the embassy?"

"He fell into the forest during the Winter War between Russia and Finland."

"You really are insane!"

The dialogue demonstrates the presence of narrative interpolation that inserts a foreign space between two spaces known to exist in reality. The foreign space in question is the hole. This hole

is situated between two spaces that concretely exist, namely Iraq and the forest located between Russia and Finland. These two locations are separated by approximately three thousand two hundred kilometers. Nevertheless, the relatively shallow hole into which the old man from the Abbasid Caliphate era, the protagonist, and the Russian soldier all fall functions as a connecting medium between the two locations. This condition demonstrates the operation of interpolation, namely the strategy of inserting the hole as a foreign space between Iraq and the Russia–Finland forest, both of which are recognized as real spaces. In addition to the insertion of a foreign space, the narrative also involves the removal of attributes inherently attached to a particular space through the strategy of misattribution.

Misattribution

Misattribution constitutes the final strategy in the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of space within postmodern fiction. Misattribution refers to the removal of attributes inherently associated with a particular space and their arbitrary replacement with alternative attributes (McHale, 1987:46). This strategy is illustrated in the following excerpt.

أخذت أتفحص الحفرة. كانت تشبه البئر جدرانها طينية رطبة، لكن رائحة زكية هادئة كانت تفوح من مسامات الطين. ربما رائحة زهور،

(Blāsim, 2015:133)

I began to study the hole. It resembled a well, its walls slick with damp clay, yet from the pores of the earth there drifted a fragrance soft and sweet, almost like the scent of flowers.

The excerpt demonstrates the strategy of misattribution, namely the removal of attributes associated with the spatial setting of the narrative. Attributes that would conventionally be attached to a large hole are eliminated and replaced with alternative attributes. Under ordinary circumstances, a hole located underground would possess an unpleasant odor, or at the very least the scent of soil mixed with the substances contained within it. However, rather than emitting an unpleasant smell, the hole situated in the garden of the Natural History Museum, as the central setting of “al-Ḥafrah”, is narrated as possessing a fragrance resembling that of flowers. Furthermore, a single hole would ordinarily exist in only one location, namely in Baghdad. Yet, in an absurd manner, the same hole is simultaneously located elsewhere, namely in the forest between Russia and Finland, thereby creating an interconnection between the two places. This interconnection between spaces consequently produces a linkage among three historical eras: the Abbasid Caliphate era, the era of World War II, and the post-Saddam Hussein period. The interconnection of these three eras is represented through the absurd encounter among the elderly inhabitant of the hole, the Russian soldier, and the protagonist.

In summary, these three strategies function simultaneously to construct and deconstruct space within the narrative. Juxtaposition constructs and deconstructs spaces by placing together spaces that should not logically coexist side by side. Examples include the juxtaposition of Iraq with the forest between Russia and Finland, as well as the juxtaposition of temporalities between the Abbasid Caliphate era, World War II, and the post-Saddam Hussein conflict era. Subsequently, interpolation introduces a single inhabitable hole as a foreign space situated between Iraq and the forest between Russia and Finland, despite the substantial geographical distance separating them. Finally, misattribution detaches the hole from attributes

conventionally associated with soil or unpleasant odors and replaces them with the attribute of fragrance. In addition, misattribution also removes the hole from the attribute of immobility and replaces it with the capacity to shift from Iraq to the forest between Russia and Finland, thereby enabling it to connect three individuals originating from three different historical eras.

Recursive Structure

Recursive structure constitutes the postmodern fiction concept that most prominently foregrounds the ontological dimension. This structure is realized through the application of the hypodiegetic concept. The concept itself refers to the existence of a world beneath another world within the narrative (Higgins, 1978). Within the hypodiegetic world, reality undergoes repetition through the emergence of new objects derived from older objects, thereby disrupting the direction of the narrative (McHale, 1987:112-113). McHale argues that such a structure gives rise to what he terms a “strange loop,” a condition in which the narrative becomes enclosed within an endless cycle. It is this loop that ultimately foregrounds the ontological dimension of the postmodern fictional world, since within such a narrative enclosure, the ontology of the world may shift without altering the narrative itself. This structure is illustrated through the following dialogue.

من أنت؟! سألتني لاهثة. كانت هناك جروح تشوّه وجهها الجميل...
أنا جني... ما الذي حدث لك؟ شعرت بأن صوتي كما لو أنه يعود إلى أزمان قديمة.
أجابت: كان يطار دني (روبوت) تحليل الدم
كانت تمص إصبعها المتورم بهيئة فطر.
أمر عاد.

(Blāsim, 2015:138)

*“Who are you?!” she asked between gasping breaths. Wounds marred her beautiful face.
“I am a jinn... What happened to you?” My voice sounded as though it had returned from ancient ages.*

*She answered, “A blood-analysis robot was chasing me.”
She sucked on her swollen finger, bloated like a mushroom.
“It’s nothing unusual.”*

The dialogue demonstrates the recursive structure within the short story “al-Ḥafrah.” In this dialogue, the reality surrounding the protagonist undergoes repetition. This reality encompasses the presence of an individual who falls into a hole, experiences fear toward someone who has long inhabited the hole, subsequently interacts with that figure, and eventually discovers the presence of a corpse within the hole. This repetition of reality takes place within the framework of a hypodiegetic world.

Hofstadter’s concept of the hypodiegetic world affirms the repetition of reality within a world situated beneath another world in the narrative. This repetition of reality is illustrated through the excerpt above, which reproduces the reality presented at the beginning of the short story. At the beginning of the narrative, the protagonist becomes the individual who falls into the hole, subsequently fears the old man who has lived for an extended period and transformed into a jinn within the hole, and eventually discovers the corpse of a Russian soldier. Later, in the excerpt located at the conclusion of the story, a new character, a young woman originating from a technologically advanced world, falls into the same hole. She then becomes frightened by the protagonist, who has transformed into a jinn living for a prolonged period within the hole, and

subsequently discovers the corpse of the old man who had previously inhabited the hole. This condition indicates that the concluding section of the short story constitutes a hypodiegetic world, namely a world situated beneath another world represented at the beginning of the narrative. In other words, the conclusion of the story functions as a repetition of the reality depicted in its opening section.

According to McHale, the repetition of reality within recursive structure gives rise to new objects derived from older objects. In the excerpt above, the woman who falls into the hole emerges as a new object derived from the protagonist, who functions as the older object. Through the emergence of this new object, the narrative becomes endless, or what McHale terms a “strange loop.” This singular narrative loop encompasses a transformation in the ontology of the world, shifting from the ontology of the protagonist’s world as the older object to the ontology of the woman’s world as the new object. Based on this strange loop characterized by the repetition of reality, several possibilities emerge regarding the young woman’s fate. First, she may witness the death of the protagonist. Second, she may herself become a jinn who inhabits the hole for an extended period. Third, she may eventually encounter another individual who falls into the hole she inhabits after what is perceived as only a brief passage of time, despite the lapse of centuries.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that al-Ḥafrah constructs its narrative through four postmodern features identified by McHale: world pluralism, construction and deconstruction of space, recursive structure, and anti-realism. These features destabilize conventional reality by connecting multiple worlds, historical periods, and narrative levels. As a result, the story foregrounds ontological questions rather than epistemological concerns.

The findings contribute to narratological studies by extending the application of McHale’s framework to contemporary Iraqi fiction. They also contribute to the study of Middle Eastern postmodern literature by demonstrating how conflict, memory, and displacement are represented through ontologically unstable narrative forms.

This study of “al-Ḥafrah” by Ḥasan Blāsim through the framework of postmodern fiction theory is expected to serve as a point of departure for further research, whether involving similar material objects in the form of short stories set against the background of the Iraqi conflict or employing similar narratological theories of fiction. Although the homology between the narrative and the real world may appear relatively limited, meaningful literary research can nevertheless be conducted through the application of an appropriate theoretical framework. Therefore, the researcher hopes that future studies will emerge, including those that may critically challenge the conclusions of this study, provided that such critiques are undertaken within a rigorous scholarly framework.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Malik Aljabar Muhammad

Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft.

Mahmudah

Supervision, Validation, review & editing.

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