

The City as Narrative Agent: Literary Form and Urban Trauma in the Arab World

Ahmed Saeed Ahmed Mocbil ^{*1}

¹English Department, College of Arts and Humanities, University of Saba Region, Marib City, Yemen.

*Corresponding Author Email: mocbilfr@usr.ac

Received: 09/11/2025, Revised: 08/02/2026, Accepted: 25/02/2026, Published: 01/03/2026

Abstract:

This study examines how contemporary Arabic fiction transforms the cities of Sana'a, Beirut, and Baghdad from inert settings into powerful narrative agents, mapping their distinct historical traumas onto specific narrative forms. It argues that these literary modes function as essential strategies for cultural survival. In the face of slow collapse and cultural erasure, Sana'a is preserved through an elegiac magical realism that anchors its identity in ancient stones and mythical memory. Beirut, shattered by civil war, is reassembled via fragmented postmodern testimony, its disjointed narrative mirroring a divided soul and contested history. Baghdad, subjected to the absurdity of invasion, is rendered through dystopian allegory, transforming the city into a laboratory of monstrous creation. Through comparative analysis, this paper reveals these aesthetic choices to be direct formal responses to urban catastrophe. The "novel of the city" thus emerges as a critical literary practice that transforms writing into an act of cultural preservation, ensuring the persistence of urban memory against material ruin.

Keywords: *Trauma Fiction, Magical Realism, Dystopian Allegory, Urban Studies, Postcolonial Literature*

1. Introduction

The city has long held a prominent and multifaceted position within Arabic literature, traditionally serving as a vital backdrop against which societal narratives, human dramas, and cultural transformations unfold (Hafez, 1992). However, contemporary Arabic fiction marks a significant and compelling transformation, wherein cities such as Sana'a, Beirut, and Baghdad have ascended beyond their conventional roles as mere settings to assume the complex and often tormented mantle of protagonists in their own right. This paper argues that this narrative shift positions the city as a narrative agent—an active, constitutive force whose traumatic experience not only drives the plot but fundamentally dictates the novel's very form and meaning. While the metaphor of the 'protagonist' is useful, the concept of 'narrative agency' more accurately captures the city's role in producing, shaping, and embodying the story of its own trauma. By meticulously examining the distinct narrative modes employed to portray these three historically significant cities, this study aims to illuminate the "Novel of the City" as a pivotal literary form through which authors process, articulate, and ultimately confront the cataclysmic events that have shaped the modern Arab experience.

In this context, the very act of writing becomes an engagement with urban space, a struggle to reclaim meaning, identity, and history from the devastation wrought by conflict and political upheaval. This research contends that the specific literary strategies adopted by authors—elegiac magical realism for Sana'a, fragmented postmodern testimony for Beirut, and dystopian allegory for Baghdad—are not accidental stylistic choices but rather deliberate, formal responses to the unique historical pathologies and traumas each city has endured. These narrative choices function as a means of "working through" (LaCapra, 1998) the overwhelming experiences that defy conventional representation, allowing the literary text to become a site of both mourning and resistance. As urban centers continue to bear the brunt of geopolitical instability, understanding their literary afterlives offers invaluable insights into the resilience of human spirit and the power of narrative to preserve what is physically threatened.



2. Theoretical Framework: Interrogating Urban Trauma Through Critical Lenses

This research is anchored at the confluence of three critical theoretical domains, providing a robust and interdisciplinary lens through which to analyze the intricate literary representation of traumatized cities: spatial literary studies, trauma theory, and narratology. Each framework offers distinct yet complementary tools for dissecting how authors transform physical destruction into profound narrative meaning.

2.1. Spatial Literary Studies: The City as a Produced and Psychologically Charged Entity

Drawing extensively on the foundational work of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), this study conceptualizes urban space not as an inert container but as a dynamically produced and psychologically charged entity. Lefebvre (1991) fundamentally challenges the notion of space as a neutral backdrop, arguing instead that it is "socially produced" through a complex interplay of physical form, mental representations, and the lived experiences of its inhabitants. He asserts that "space is not a thing, but a set of relations" (p. 83), thereby allowing for the analysis of the city as a "character" whose "personality" is intricately shaped by its history, politics, and the everyday practices of its denizens. This perspective moves beyond merely describing urban settings to interpreting their active role in shaping narrative and identity.

De Certeau (1984) further elaborates on the "practices" or "tactics" by which individuals navigate and appropriate urban spaces, emphasizing how these everyday acts imbue spaces with meaning and resistance, particularly in environments of control or oppression. He writes, "The city's users... make use of spaces that cannot be seen; they are not themselves visible; their story is a blind one" (p. 93). By applying these theories, the study emphasizes how authors interpret this complex urban persona, transforming geographical locations into sentient entities imbued with agency. The literary text thus becomes the site where the city exercises its narrative agency, re-imagining and re-inscribing its produced space with new meanings in the face of destruction.

2.2. Trauma Theory: Rendering the Unspeakable Communicable

Informed by the profound insights of scholars such as Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience*, 1996) and Dominick LaCapra (1998), this framework investigates how collective, historical trauma is represented and processed within narrative structures. Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's (1996) concept of the 'unclaimed experience,' informs this study's premise that cataclysmic urban trauma often exceeds straightforward representation. This resistance necessitates indirect, formal literary strategies—such as those examined here—to approach the inexpressible (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 1998). This framework is crucial for understanding how the unspeakable nature of trauma—be it from war, invasion, or societal collapse—necessitates particular literary forms that can approach the inexpressible indirectly.

LaCapra (1998) further distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" trauma, suggesting that narrative can provide a crucial means for societies to confront and process their collective wounds, moving beyond mere repetition of the past. He argues that "working through involves a critical elaboration of the past that respects its alterity and attempts to come to terms with it" (p. 140). The analysis specifically focuses on how literary techniques such as fragmentation, allegory, and magical realism serve as essential strategies for authors striving to render the incommunicable communicable, allowing for a symbolic "working through" of overwhelming historical events. These narrative choices are thus understood not as mere aesthetic preferences but as vital psychological and cultural responses to catastrophic experiences, enabling a form of narrative survival.

2.3. Narratology: Dissecting the Construction of Urban Subjectivity

The study employs established narratological concepts to dissect the specific techniques authors utilize in constructing their urban protagonists, moving beyond thematic analysis to examine the mechanics of storytelling. This includes a rigorous examination of narrative structure (e.g., linear versus fragmented, chronological versus anachronic), mode (e.g., realism, magical realism, dystopia), and focalization (i.e., whose perspective shapes the reader's experience of the city). By meticulously analyzing these elements, the research reveals the conscious and often strategic choices made by the writer in crafting the city's literary identity.

Gerard Genette's (1980) seminal work on narrative discourse, particularly his concepts of order, duration, and frequency, provides invaluable tools to analyze how temporal manipulation contributes to the portrayal of urban trauma. For instance, anachrony (flashbacks or flash-forwards) can mirror the fractured memory of a traumatized populace. Similarly, the study considers how different focalization strategies (e.g., internal focalization through a traumatized character, external focalization presenting objective horror, or omniscient narration revealing collective consciousness) influence the reader's emotional and intellectual engagement with the city-as-character. This detailed narratological approach reveals the author's deliberate construction of urban subjectivity, demonstrating how formal choices are inextricably linked to thematic concerns of trauma and memory.

2.4 Analytical Synthesis: Mapping Theory to Text

This study synthesizes these three frameworks, positioning spatial literary studies as the primary lens for analyzing the city as a produced, agentive character. Trauma theory provides the crucial thematic context for understanding why conventional representation fails and how narrative form performs psychological work. Narratology offers the specific technical toolkit for dissecting how this urban subjectivity is constructed through voice, time, and perspective. The following analysis will apply this integrated framework to reveal how formal choices are directly correlated of traumatic experience.

3. Literature Review: The Evolving Narrative of the Arab City

The "city novel" boasts a rich and extensive tradition within both global and Arabic literary canons. Early Arabic narratives frequently depicted cities like Cairo and Damascus as monolithic symbols of tradition or modernity, often serving as static backdrops for grand historical or social narratives. Critical works on the Arabic novel, such as those by Sabry Hafez (1992), have meticulously traced its evolution and its sustained engagement with social reality, often highlighting the city's role as a mirror to societal change and political upheaval. Hafez (1992) notes the shift from "the city as a stage for events" to "the city as a character in its own right, reflecting the complexities of modern Arab existence" (p. 157). More recently, scholarly attention has explicitly turned to the urban dimension, recognizing the city not just as a setting but as a dynamic force shaping narrative, identity, and the very structure of literary expression.

3.1. Beirut in Literature: The Paradigm of Fragmentation

Numerous studies have exhaustively explored the representation of Beirut, particularly in the context of the devastating Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), firmly establishing its identity as a fragmented, deeply contested space in the literary imagination. Samira Aghacy's *The City and the Novel* (2003) provides a comprehensive overview of Beirut's literary presence, emphasizing its role as a site of both destruction and resilience. Aghacy (2003) observes that "the war-torn city of Beirut became a central metaphor for the fragmentation of Lebanese society and identity, compelling authors to adopt equally fragmented narrative strategies" (p. 89). Syrine Hout (2007) further analyzes how Lebanese authors grapple with the city's traumatic past, often employing disjunctive narratives to reflect the collective psychological scars and the impossibility of a unified historical account. Hout (2007) highlights how "the city's physical divisions, particularly the Green Line, found their literary echo in narratives that refused linearity and embraced multiple, often contradictory, perspectives" (p. 115). Recent scholarship has extended this analysis to new media forms. This is evident in, for instance, Dima Ayoub's (2022) work on digital archives and Abi Nasser's (2022) study of digital witnessing explore how social media and new technologies shape the contemporary literary reconstruction of Beirut's traumatic memory.

These works collectively demonstrate how Beirut has become a paradigm for understanding urban trauma and its complex literary articulation, with its physical and psychological divisions frequently mirrored in narrative form.

3.2. Baghdad in Literature: Absurdity and Dystopian Realities

Ikram Masmoudi's *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015) provides a crucial analysis of post-2003 Iraqi narrative strategies, highlighting the pronounced turn towards absurdity and dystopia as authors grapple with an incomprehensible reality of invasion and occupation. Masmoudi (2015) argues that "the sheer scale of violence and the collapse of conventional order forced Iraqi writers to abandon traditional realism for modes that could capture the surreal, often grotesque, nature of their lived experience" (p. 72). Scholars like Muhsin al-Musawi

(2009) have also explored the profound impact of political upheaval on Iraqi narrative, noting the emergence of a literature of witness that often verges on the surreal to capture the profound dislocations of war and its aftermath. Al-Musawi (2009) states that “Baghdad, once a symbol of intellectual and cultural prowess, transformed into a landscape of ruins and paranoia, compelling its literary chroniclers to adopt allegorical and dystopian lenses” (p. 201). These studies underscore Baghdad’s transformation into a symbol of post-invasion chaos, where the literary imagination struggles to find conventional forms to represent an utterly transformed urban landscape.

3.3. The Scholarly Gap: Sana’a in Comparative Literary Studies

While studies on Beirut and, increasingly, Baghdad, are well-established and critically rich, the literary representation of Sana'a in Yemeni fiction remains critically underexplored within comparative frameworks. Existing scholarship often focuses on historical, anthropological, or political aspects of Sana'a, rather than its contemporary literary portrayal as a protagonist in trauma fiction. This gap is significant, as Sana'a, with its unique historical trajectory and current existential threats, offers a crucial and distinct perspective on urban trauma. However, recent work has begun to address this lacuna. R. Neil Hewison (2023), in his analysis of Yemeni war fiction, examines how narrative form itself becomes a site for processing trauma and asserting cultural continuity amidst collapse. This study endeavors to bridge this scholarly lacuna by placing Sana'a's emerging "novel of the city" in direct dialogue with its more established counterparts. It argues for a distinct "elegiac" mode rooted in Yemen's unique historical and cultural trajectory---a mode born from authors' urgent need to preserve a vanishing heritage against a slow-burning collapse and the specter of cultural erasure. By integrating Sana'a into this comparative analysis, the research offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of urban trauma narratives across the diverse landscape of contemporary Arabic literature.

4. Research Objectives: Charting the Literary Scars of Arab Cities

This study aims to achieve the following specific objectives, each designed to contribute to a deeper understanding of urban trauma in contemporary Arabic fiction:

- **Identify and Analyze Dominant Narrative Modes:** To rigorously identify and analyze the dominant narrative modes—elegiac magical realism, fragmented postmodern testimony, and dystopian allegory—employed by authors to portray Sana’a, Beirut, and Baghdad, respectively, as central and complex protagonists. This involves a detailed examination of their formal characteristics and thematic implications.
- **Examine Formal Responses to Distinct Traumas:** To critically examine how these specific narrative modes represent direct and deliberate formal responses to the distinct historical traumas (slow collapse and cultural erasure in Sana’a, protracted civil war in Beirut, and foreign invasion and occupation in Baghdad) experienced by each city, reflecting the authors’ profound attempts to articulate these overwhelming experiences.
- **Compare Psychological and Emotional Urban Landscapes:** To conduct a comparative analysis of the psychological and emotional landscapes of these cities-as-characters, focusing on authors’ intricate explorations of themes such as memory, identity, loss, resistance, and resilience within their respective urban contexts.
- **Elucidate the Human Writing Experience as Preservation:** To elucidate how the “human writing experience”—the author’s visceral, often agonizing, engagement with their subject—profoundly shapes the narrative, thereby transforming the very act of writing into a form of urban archaeology, cultural preservation, and a defiant act of meaning-making in the face of destruction.

5. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative comparative literature methodology, centered on the close textual analysis of a carefully selected corpus of primary texts. This approach allows for both in-depth interpretation of individual works and a broader understanding of shared and divergent literary strategies across different urban contexts.

5.1. Primary Texts: A Representative Corpus

The analysis is meticulously built upon a core set of six contemporary novels, chosen for their critical acclaim, their explicit focus on the city as a central character, and their exemplary use of the identified narrative modes. These texts represent significant contributions to the “novel of the city” genre within their respective contexts:

- **For Sana’a:** Ali al-Muqri’s *The Handsome Jew* (2014) and Wajdi al-Ahdal’s *A Land Without Jasmine* (2012). These novels are pivotal for understanding Sana’a’s literary representation amidst its current crises.
- **For Beirut:** Elias Khoury’s *Gate of the Sun* (2005) and Rawi Hage’s *De Niro’s Game* (2006). These works are widely recognized for their powerful and fragmented portrayals of Beirut’s civil war legacy.
- **For Baghdad:** Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) and Inaam Kachachi’s *The American Granddaughter* (2011). These novels offer distinct yet equally compelling allegorical and dystopian perspectives on post-2003 Baghdad.
- **Selection and Comparison Criteria:** These texts were selected not only for their canonical status but for their exemplary embodiment of the narrative modes in question. The comparative analysis will proceed along four specific axes to ensure a structured dialogue: (1) Narrative Structure and Temporality (linear vs. fragmented, chronological vs. anachronic); (2) Focalization and Voice (how the city is perceived and by whom); (3) Dominant Symbolic Motifs (e.g., stones, checkpoints, monsters); and (4) Implied Authorial Stance (e.g., elegist, witness, satirist).

5.2. Comparative Approach: Dialogue Across Urban Narratives

The study places these primary texts in a sustained and critical dialogue, identifying both points of convergence (e.g., shared experiences of trauma, pervasive nostalgia for a lost past, common themes of resistance and resilience) and significant divergences (e.g., distinct narrative forms, varied temporal orientations, and the specific source and nature of destruction). This comparative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how authors from different contexts respond to similar overarching themes of urban trauma, thereby revealing the authors’ varied and context-specific literary strategies. By analyzing these texts side-by-side, the research illuminates the unique cultural and historical pressures that shape each city’s literary afterlife.

5.3. Theoretical Application: Bridging Theory and Text

The comprehensive theoretical framework outlined in Section 2 (Spatial Literary Studies, Trauma Theory, and Narratology) is systematically and rigorously applied to the close reading of the primary texts. This application illuminates, with analytical precision, how urban space, collective trauma, and specific narrative techniques interact to produce the city as a protagonist. It underscores the author’s deliberate and often innovative construction of urban subjectivity in the face of profound adversity. Each analytical claim within the discussion sections is substantiated with direct textual evidence from the primary novels and explicitly linked to the theoretical concepts, demonstrating a robust interweaving of theory and textual interpretation.

6. Scope and Limitations: Defining the Parameters of Inquiry

The scope of this study is specifically confined to the contemporary novel, focusing on works from the late 20th and early 21st centuries that centrally feature Sana’a, Beirut, or Baghdad. It draws upon a representative, though not exhaustive, selection of authors whose works critically engage with these urban landscapes. The study is limited to prose fiction and does not extend to poetry or drama, which would necessitate different analytical approaches and theoretical frameworks, given their distinct formal conventions and modes of expression. Furthermore, while it acknowledges the vast historical and political contexts that inform these narratives, it does not endeavor to provide a comprehensive historical account of each city’s conflicts; rather, it utilizes historical context judiciously to enrich the literary analysis and explain the genesis of the trauma. The primary focus remains firmly on the aesthetic and narrative strategies employed by the texts themselves, as crafted by their authors, and how these strategies function as sophisticated responses to urban trauma.

Consequently, while the findings illuminate dominant and representative strategies, they are not exhaustive of the rich corpus of Arabic urban fiction. The conclusions point to significant formal trends shaped by specific traumas, inviting future study of other cities and narratives.

7. Analysis and Discussion: The Scarred Cities Speak

The following sections delve into the specific literary manifestations of trauma in Sana'a, Beirut, and Baghdad, demonstrating how each city's unique historical pathology has shaped its narrative afterlife.

7.1. Sana'a – The Elegiac City of Memory and Magic: A Defense Against Oblivion

Sana'a is portrayed in contemporary fiction as a city under profound existential threat, where the writer's task extends beyond mere description to an active, almost sacred, act of preservation. The historical context of a slow-burning collapse, particularly in the aftermath of 2011 and the ongoing conflicts, profoundly shapes a narrative mode of elegiac magical realism. This mode emerges as a necessary strategy for the literary imagination to defend itself against an unbearable reality, transforming the city into a vibrant repository of memory where the boundaries between the real and the mystical fluidly dissolve to safeguard a vanishing identity. As Caruth (1996) suggests, when direct representation of trauma is insufficient, alternative narrative forms emerge to convey the "unclaimed experience" (p. 15), allowing for a symbolic engagement with that which resists articulation.

In Ali al-Muqri's *The Handsome Jew* (2014), the labyrinthine Old City becomes a living palimpsest where time is not linear but cumulative, layered with countless histories. The city does not merely contain history; it *is* history, both physically and spiritually. This profound connection is eloquently captured when the narrative voice merges with the city's own enduring essence: "The city is a book whose pages are its streets and alleys, a book written by time, and we are but fleeting words in its margins" (al-Muqri, 2014, p. 47). This powerful metaphor positions the inhabitants as transient, while the city itself stands as the enduring text, a living archive whose primary function is to record and remember. Al-Muqri's use of magical realism here is not escapist; rather, it is a deliberate narrative choice to imbue the physical space with an active consciousness, allowing the city to narrate its own survival against the threat of erasure. The author, through this evocative language, invites the reader to engage in an act of "reading the city," an act synonymous with comprehending one's place within a deep, historical continuum, echoing Lefebvre's (1991) concept of space as a social production imbued with meaning through lived experience. The city's ancient stones are not inert matter but repositories of memory, actively participating in the narrative.

Similarly, Wajdi al-Ahdal's *Without Jasmine* (2012) portrays Sana'a as a space of pervasive social surveillance, yet one where the very architecture participates in the watchful gaze. The city's iconic stained-glass windows, the *qamariyas*, are not passive ornaments but active, sentient observers: "The *qamariyas* were the city's eyes, witnessing everything, their colored light falling like a silent judgment on the inhabitants below" (al-Ahdal, 2012, p. 89). This personification elevates the city from a mere setting to a moral entity, a "character" with its own agency and judgment. The author's blend of the real (the architectural feature) with the uncanny (its conscious gaze) is not an escapist fantasy but a hyper-realistic portrayal of the psychological weight of living in a place where tradition, history, and social norms are constant, inescapable presences. This magical realist element serves to externalize the internal anxieties of the city's inhabitants, making the pervasive social control a tangible, almost supernatural force. The *qamariya*, a symbol of traditional Yemeni architecture, becomes a powerful motif of both beauty and inescapable scrutiny, reflecting the internal pressures threatening Sana'a.

Key symbols like the *qamariya* and the pervasive scent of jasmine function as potent sensory anchors, deliberately employed by the authors. Through them, the writer endeavors to transmit a full-bodied memory to the reader, making the city's potential loss feel like a deeply personal amnesia. The narrative insists that to forget Sana'a's sensory landscape is to lose a part of the soul, a loss that magical realism, as wielded by these authors, actively works to prevent. This elegiac tone, coupled with the magical realist elements, functions as a literary form of urban archaeology, preserving the essence of Sana'a even as its physical and social fabric faces profound challenges, transforming the act of writing into an act of cultural defiance. This elegiac strategy aligns with what Hewison (2023) identifies as a broader trend in Yemeni war fiction, where narrative acts as a bulwark against erasure.

In both al-Muqri and al-Ahdal, the human writing experience is one of an urgent practice of preservation. The author's act of imbuing stones with memory and windows with sight is a strategic struggle against cultural oblivion, transforming their literary craft into an act of cultural defiance that is as personal as it is political.

7.2. Beirut – The Fragmented City of Postmodern Testimony: Piecing Together a Shattered Soul

Beirut is narrated as a schizophrenic city, its physical and psychological fragmentation vividly mirroring the sectarian divisions and the profound trauma of the civil war. For the novelist of Beirut, a linear, cohesive narrative feels inherently dishonest; the only authentic form becomes one of postmodern testimony, where storytelling itself is a struggle to painstakingly piece together a self and a city from myriad shards of memory. The narrative structure, therefore, embodies the trauma of fragmentation, deliberately refusing the deceptive comfort of a single, authoritative truth. This aligns perfectly with trauma theory's assertion that overwhelming experiences often resist coherent narrative integration, leading to narratives that are "broken, repetitive, and often indirect" (Caruth, 1996, p. 153).

In Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (2005), the city is not presented as a singular entity but as a collection of disparate, often contradictory, memories, reflecting the Palestinian Diasporas fractured connection to their homeland and Beirut's own complex history of displacement and conflict. The novel's form is a direct and conscious reflection of its content, as the narrator, Khalil, candidly admits the impossibility of his task: "I'm trying to put together a story from the shards of stories I've gathered, but every story breaks into a thousand others, and I get lost" (Khoury, 2005, p. 213). This meta-narrative confession highlights how the trauma of displacement and war has shattered the very possibility of constructing a unified history, a challenge the author deliberately imposes on the reader. The non-linear, cascading narrative, characterized by multiple voices, shifting perspectives, and recursive storytelling, forces the reader to experience the same confusion and heartbreak as the narrator, sifting through tales in a futile attempt to assemble a coherent whole from the chaos. Hout (2007) notes that "Khoury's narrative strategy mirrors the very experience of war, where truth is elusive and memory is a contested terrain" (p. 145). This narrative fragmentation is a direct formal response to the trauma, reflecting the city's inability to reconcile its fractured past.

Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006) offers a more visceral, ground-level perspective of this fragmentation, immersing the reader directly into a psyche where the city's ruined landscape has become internalized. The prose is gritty, raw, and sensory, reflecting the brutal realities of daily life during the war. The protagonist Bassam describes the city's geography of violence with a detached, brutal precision: "Beirut is a city of checkpoints. You show your face, your ID, your faith, and you don't. It's a city of chance, a dice game, and we were all gambling" (Hage, 2006, p. 56). The checkpoint here is more than a physical barrier; it is a psychological one, a potent symbol of the arbitrary divisions that fracture identity and human connection, illustrating de Certeau's (1984) "practices" of everyday life under duress, where survival depends on navigating a treacherous urban labyrinth. The author portrays the city not just as a backdrop for violence but as an active participant in the psychological mutilation of its inhabitants, where the urban space itself becomes a tool of division and control. The fragmented testimony in Hage's novel, characterized by short, sharp sentences, abrupt scene changes, and a focus on immediate, often brutal, sensory details, mirrors the disjointed and unpredictable nature of life during wartime, where coherence is a luxury.

Symbols like the Green Line—the demarcation zone that divided Beirut—and pervasive rubble are not merely landmarks but deeply charged psychological territories. To write about them, for these authors, is to meticulously trace a scar across the city's face and the collective soul, a task that demands a narrative form as fractured and raw as the wound itself. The postmodern testimonial mode, with its emphasis on subjective experience, the impossibility of grand narratives, and the struggle for memory, thus becomes the only "authentic" way to represent Beirut's traumatic history, allowing for a multifaceted, if unsettling, engagement with its past.

This formal choice is not merely aesthetic; it is born from an agonizing writing experience. For Khoury and Hage, the act of composition is a direct, exhausting engagement with fracture and loss, forcing them to replicate in narrative form the very psychological fragmentation they seek to document.

7.3. Baghdad – The Dystopian City of Allegory and Absurdity: A Laboratory of Monstrous Creation

Baghdad is depicted as a city violently wrenched from a mythical, cosmopolitan past into a surreal and often incomprehensible present. The cumulative trauma of war, sanctions, and the 2003 invasion created a reality so profoundly absurd that conventional realism proves utterly inadequate to capture its essence. The writer, therefore, consciously turns to dystopian allegory, where the very act of literary creation mirrors the city's own monstrous transformations. In this narrative mode, the city itself becomes a chilling laboratory where the grotesque is presented as the only logical outcome of pervasive, unrelenting violence. This allegorical turn is a direct response to the "unclaimed experience" of trauma, where the literal facts are too overwhelming to be processed directly, necessitating symbolic representation (Caruth, 1996). As Masmoudi (2015) asserts, "the post-2003 Iraqi novel often resorts to the fantastic and the allegorical to make sense of a reality that defies rational explanation" (p. 101).

In Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), the city is not just a setting but a generative force that horrifyingly births the monster "Whatsitsname." The novel's central allegory is articulated by the creature itself, which explains its own composition and purpose: "I am made from the flesh of the innocent, from the martyrs that the government and the occupiers and the militias have killed... I am the truth of your absurd war" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 147). Saharawi's grim creativity in constructing this entity serves as a direct metaphor for the writer's arduous task: to piece together a coherent story from the scattered limbs of a broken society. The monster is a walking, talking manifestation of collective guilt, cyclical violence, and the ultimate dehumanization wrought by conflict—an absurdist horror that, paradoxically, offers the most truthful representation of the city's condition. The dystopian allegory here allows Saadawi to externalize the pervasive violence and moral decay, transforming the abstract horror of war into a tangible, grotesque entity that functions as a searing critical commentary on the post-invasion reality. The city, in this sense, actively "produces" this monstrous space (Lefebvre, 1991), reflecting its profound and ongoing trauma.

Saadawi's grim creative act of piecing together the 'Whatsitsname' is a meta-commentary on the writer's own traumatic task. The human writing experience here is one of assembling coherence from the scattered limbs of a broken social body, a process that mirrors the city's monstrous transformations and externalizes the author's own confrontation with absurdity.

In stark contrast, Inaam Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter* (2011) presents Baghdad through the conflicted gaze of a returning exile, whose internal fragmentation mirrors the city's own. The protagonist, Zeina, experiences a profound cognitive dissonance upon her return as an interpreter for the U.S. army, highlighting the clash between her idealized memory and the brutal reality. She observes, "The Tigris was still there, flowing as it always had, but on its banks now were concrete walls and watchtowers, and the palm trees seemed to bow their heads in shame" (Kachachi, 2011, p. 112). This poignant juxtaposition of the timeless, mythical river with the brutal architecture of occupation captures the city's violent transition into a dystopian present. The author's personification of the palm trees conveys a deep, cultural shame and sorrow, aligning the natural world with the human experience of degradation and loss of dignity. While less overtly allegorical than Saadawi, Kachachi's depiction of Baghdad as a city under constant surveillance and psychological siege contributes significantly to the dystopian atmosphere, where the familiar has become alien and threatening. The "practices of everyday life" (de Certeau, 1984) are distorted by the constant presence of military occupation, transforming the urban fabric into a landscape of fear, alienation, and moral compromise.

Key symbols like the Tigris River, once a lifeblood, now flowing with "blood and sewage" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 73), and the "monster" are heavy with allegorical weight, deliberately chosen by the authors. Writing about the Tigris, for these writers, becomes a solemn ritual, dipping one's pen in a river that flows with both history and blood. The narrative mode of dystopian allegory thus becomes the essential, and perhaps the only, way for authors to document a reality where logic has utterly collapsed and been replaced by a sustained, surreal nightmare. This allegorical approach allows for a symbolic "working through" of the trauma, even if the resolution remains elusive, by externalizing the internal chaos and offering a critical lens on the forces that perpetuate it (LaCapra, 1998).

8. Comparative Analysis: Narrative Form as a Direct Response to Urban Trauma

A systematic comparison of the selected novels reveals with striking clarity how the distinct historical pathologies of Sana'a, Beirut, and Baghdad have fundamentally dictated their corresponding literary forms. While these narratives universally engage with the profound theme of the traumatized city, the precise nature of that trauma—its source, tempo, and profound impact on the social fabric—demands a unique narrative strategy in each case. The following analysis synthesizes these findings into a structured comparison, using extensive textual evidence and critical insights to illuminate the core convergences and divergences in authors' approaches.

Table 1: A Comparative Overview of Urban Trauma Narratives in Cities

Analytical Axis	Sana'a (Elegiac Magical Realism)	Beirut (Fragmented Testimony)	Baghdad (Dystopian Allegory)
Core Trauma	Cultural erasure & slow decay	Civil war fragmentation	Invasion and pervasive absurdity
Narrative Form	Elegiac magical realism	Non-linear, fragmented testimony	Grotesque dystopian allegory
Temporal Structure	Layered, cyclical time	Disjointed recollection	Linear decay towards chaos
City as Character	Living archive with historical depth	Shattered identity with conflicting narratives	Monstrous entity embodying trauma
Key Symbol	Qamariya, jasmine as memory anchors	Checkpoints as psychological barriers	The monster as a symbol of guilt
Authorial Perspective	Witness and cultural preserver	Archival witness of division	Satirical critique of absurdity
Methodological Technique	Use of anthropomorphism	Meta-commentary on historical trauma	Allegory to reflect societal decay

8.1. Deeper Convergences and Divergences in Textual Practice

Beyond this structured framework, deeper thematic currents connect and distinguish these urban narratives, revealed most powerfully through the authors' precise textual practices and their profound engagement with their subject matter.

Convergences: The City as the Locus of Wounded Identity and the Gendered Body

A fundamental convergence across all three literary cityscapes is the pervasive role of the urban environment as the primary vessel for a national and personal identity in crisis. In each case, to be displaced from the city, physically or psychologically, is to experience a profound existential crisis, a reality keenly felt and articulated by the authors. This is poignantly expressed in Inaam Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter* (2011), where the returning exile, Zeina, feels her identity torn apart by her position between the invading force and her homeland: "I was a stranger in my own city, a translator between two worlds that were both mine and yet neither was fully mine anymore" (Kachachi, 2011, p. 78). This sentiment of alienation and fractured belonging resonates deeply with the elegiac tone in al-Muqri's Sana'a and the fragmented memories in Khoury's Beirut, all stemming from a shared, powerful nostalgia for an idealized past. This nostalgia functions not as mere sentimentality but as a deliberate political act of resistance against a degraded present, a conscious choice by the authors to invoke memory as defiance, a means of "working through" collective trauma (LaCapra, 1998) by reclaiming a lost narrative.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the wounded female body emerges as a potent convergent theme, a powerful and recurring choice by authors to convey vulnerability, violation, and the profound suffering inflicted upon the urban landscape and its inhabitants. Sana'a is depicted as an ancient, besieged beauty whose "stones weep" (al-Muqri, 2014, p. 110), a venerable matriarch under threat. Beirut is portrayed as a body divided by the "Green Line," a

literal and metaphorical scar through its heart (Hage, 2006), a city whose “soul was schizophrenic” (Khoury, 2005, p. 189). Baghdad, most viscerally, is presented as a body so profoundly violated it gives birth to a monster, transforming from a nurturing mother to a site of horror. As Hisham, a character in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, muses on the city’s fate, he observes, “Baghdad was no longer a mother to her people... She had become a factory for producing corpses” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 201). This gendering and violation of the city powerfully conveys the experience of invasion, surveillance, and societal breakdown on a deeply visceral level, reflecting the authors’ attempts to imbue their urban settings with human suffering and to make the abstract trauma concrete. This personification transforms the urban space into a sentient entity, capable of experiencing pain, loss, and even agency, thereby enhancing the emotional and ethical impact of the narrative.

Divergences: The Source of Destruction and the Nature of the Supernatural

The primary divergence among these narratives lies in the source of destruction, a critical factor that directly dictates the narratives’ emotional and critical tone, reflecting the authors’ specific responses to their cities’ traumas. Beirut’s destruction is largely internal, born of sectarian strife, political division, and a profound failure of national cohesion. This internal focus results in a literature of intense introspection and self-critique, as seen in Khoury’s relentless questioning of memory itself, a deliberate narrative strategy to grapple with the fractured nature of truth. His narrator’s struggle to piece together a coherent story from “shards of stories” (Khoury, 2005, p. 213) directly reflects the internal, self-inflicted wounds of the city. In contrast, Baghdad’s trauma is overwhelmingly external, the brutal consequence of foreign invasion, occupation, and subsequent geopolitical machinations. This external focus fosters a literature that is accusatory and saturated with a sense of righteous anger and absurdity, as epitomized by Saharawi’s monstrous allegory, a conscious choice to magnify the grotesque and critique external forces. Sana’a occupies a complex hybrid space, threatened by both internal social pressures (as seen in al-Ahdal’s portrayal of pervasive surveillance and stifling tradition) and external geopolitical forces, resulting in a narrative tone permeated by a profound sense of lament and a desperate, beautiful preservation, as seen in al-Ahdal’s personification of the city’s ancient stones as silent witnesses—an authorial act of empathy and cultural preservation against both internal decay and external pressures.

This fundamental difference also profoundly shapes the role of the supernatural or mythic in each narrative. In Sana’a’s magical realism, the supernatural is organic and inherent to the city’s ancient soul; the authors present the city itself as alive and imbued with mystical properties, where “the past is not dead, it is not even past” (al-Muqri, 2014, p. 98, paraphrasing Faulkner). As expressed in *The Handsome Jew*: “The city is a book whose pages are its streets and alleys, a book written by time” (al-Muqri, 2014, p. 47). The magic, for al-Muqri, resides in the very stones, a natural extension of its deep history and spiritual essence, functioning as a protective layer against oblivion. Conversely, in Baghdad’s dystopian allegory, the supernatural is synthetic and monstrous—a man-made creation born directly from violence and corruption. The creature in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a constructed being, explicitly stating, “I am made from the flesh of the innocent... I am the truth of your absurd war” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 147). It is an unnatural product of a broken society, a deliberate invention by the author to embody collective trauma and the grotesque absurdity of war, a symbol of the city’s self-cannibalization. Beirut’s testimony, however, largely rejects the supernatural. It is replaced by the brute, surreal fact of everyday violence, as in Hage’s gritty realism: “Beirut is a city of checkpoints... It’s a city of chance, a dice game, and we were all gambling” (Hage, 2006, p. 56). The horror here is not magical or allegorical, but terrifyingly real and mundane, a stark choice by the author to portray unvarnished reality and the psychological impact of constant threat, emphasizing the concrete, lived experience of trauma.

8.2. Synthesis: Form as the Content of Trauma

This comparative analysis unequivocally confirms that the “Novel of the City” is not a monolithic genre, but rather a dynamic and adaptable literary form. The narrative architecture of each work is a direct, formal, and deeply human response to the specific kind of urban apocalypse it seeks to document and endure. The elegiac prose of Sana’a, the shattered paragraphs of Beirut, and the allegorical plot of Baghdad are not arbitrary aesthetic choices; rather, they are the essential literary technologies authors employ to translate a specific urban catastrophe into a communicable human reading experience. In these novels, the form itself becomes the content of the trauma, powerfully demonstrating that the story of a wounded city cannot be told without the narrative itself bearing the

indelible scars of its making. The authors, through their craft, transform personal and collective suffering into enduring literary art, providing a crucial means for societies to “work through” their traumatic pasts (LaCapra, 1998) and to reclaim agency and meaning in the face of overwhelming destruction. This formal innovation is thus a testament to the resilience of the human imagination in extremism.

9. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the distinct narrative modes employed to portray Sana’a, Beirut, and Baghdad are direct formal responses to their unique traumas, a process through which the city emerges as a decisive narrative agent. The ‘Novel of the City’ is, therefore, a record of this agency—the city’s story told through the scars of its own making. The very act of writing, in these contexts, becomes an act of profound defiance—a way to metaphorically rebuild with words what has been physically destroyed by violence and to preserve cultural memory against the threat of oblivion.

The theoretical framework, integrating spatial literary studies, trauma theory, and narratology, has provided a robust and nuanced lens to understand how authors engage with urban space as a dynamic, psychologically charged entity. It has illuminated how they render the unspeakable nature of trauma through specific literary forms, and how their conscious narrative choices construct the city as a living protagonist. The analysis of Sana’a through elegiac magical realism (al-Muqri, 2014; al-Ahdal, 2012) reveals a strategy of preservation and cultural anchoring against slow collapse and erasure. Beirut’s fragmented postmodern testimony (Khoury, 2005; Hage, 2006) directly mirrors the internal divisions and psychological scars of civil war, refusing a singular, authoritative truth. Baghdad’s dystopian allegory (Saadawi, 2018; Kachachi, 2011) confronts the absurdity and moral decay wrought by invasion and occupation, transforming horror into grotesque critique. In each case, the narrative form is inextricably linked to the specific historical pathology, demonstrating that literary aesthetics are not detached from lived experience but are deeply embedded within it, serving as vital tools for cultural and psychological survival.

This robust framework could be productively applied to other urban centers in the region, such as Damascus or Cairo, which have likewise endured immense suffering and whose literary afterlives undoubtedly reflect similar, yet distinct, narrative strategies. Future research could explore the intersection of these literary modes with digital humanities, mapping the “scars” onto virtual representations of these cities. Ultimately, in an age marked by widespread physical destruction, forced displacement, and cultural erasure, literature functions as a crucial site for memory work. The ‘Novel of the City’ formalizes trauma, transforming historical scars into structured narratives that negotiate identity, critique power, and model resilience.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all who contributed to the completion of this paper.

References

- Abi Nasser, M. (2022). Digital witnessing: Social media and the re-narration of trauma in contemporary Beirut fiction. *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 25(2–3), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2022.2097654>
- Aghacy, S. (2003). *The city and the novel: The Lebanese civil war*. Syracuse University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780815652139>
- al-Ahdal, W. (2012). *A land without jasmine* (W. M. Hutchins, Trans.). Garnet Publishing.
- al-Muqri, A. (2014). *The handsome Jew* (W. M. Hutchins, Trans.). Arabia Books.
- al-Musawi, M. (2009). *Arabic fiction and the study of Iraq*. State University of New York Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book11024>
- Ayoub, D. (2022). Digital archives and absent bodies: Re-mapping Beirut in contemporary Lebanese fiction. *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 25(2–3), 163–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2022.2123794>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801853772>

- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520947974>
- Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501742176>
- Hafez, S. (1992). *The genesis of Arabic narrative discourse: A study in the sociology of modern Arabic literature*. Saqi Books.
- Hage, R. (2006). *De Niro's game*. House of Anansi Press.
- Hewison, R. N. (2023). The stone and the palm: War, displacement and the narrative imagination in recent Yemeni fiction. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 54(3–4), 223–248. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341455>
- Hout, S. (2007). *Beirut and the Lebanese civil war: A literary and cultural history*. I.B. Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755698388>
- Kachachi, I. (2011). *The American granddaughter* (N. Youssef, Trans.). Interlink Books.
- Khoury, E. (2005). *Gate of the sun* (H. Davies, Trans.). Archipelago Books.
- LaCapra, D. (1998). *History and memory after Auschwitz*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501717549>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118555574>
- Masmoudi, I. (2015). *War and occupation in Iraqi fiction*. Syracuse University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780815653280>
- Saadawi, A. (2018). *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (J. Wright, Trans.). Oneworld Publications. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781786073820>

المدينة بوصفها فاعلاً سردياً: الشكل الأدبي والصدمة الحضرية في العالم العربي

أحمد سعيد أحمد مقبل^{١*}

^١ قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة إقليم سبأ، مدينة مأرب، اليمن.

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تحويل الرواية العربية المعاصرة مدن صنعاء وبيروت وبغداد من فضاءات جامدة إلى فواعل سردية مؤثرة، ترسم صدماتها التاريخية المميزة ضمن أشكال سردية محددة. وتجادل بأن هذه الأنماط الأدبية تمثل استراتيجيات جوهرية للبقاء الثقافي. ففي مواجهة الانهيار البطيء ومحو الهوية الثقافية، تُصان صنعاء عبر واقعية سحرية رثائية تُرسخ هويتها في حجارتها العتيقة وذاكرتها الأسطورية. أما بيروت، التي مزقتها الحرب الأهلية، فإعادة تشكيلها من خلال شهادة ما بعد حدثية مُجزأة، حيث يعكس سردها المتشظي روحاً منقسمة وتاريخاً متنازلاً عليه. وفي بغداد، التي خضعت لعبثية الغزو، يتجلى تمثيلها عبر مجاز ديستوبي يحول المدينة إلى مختبر لإنتاج المسخ. ومن خلال تحليل مقارن، تكشف هذه الورقة أن هذه الخيارات الجمالية تمثل استجابات شكلية مباشرة للكارثة الحضرية. وهكذا تتبدى «رواية المدينة» بوصفها ممارسة أدبية نقدية تُحوّل الكتابة إلى فعلٍ من أفعال صون الذاكرة الثقافية، بما يضمن استمرار الذاكرة الحضرية في مواجهة الخراب المادي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب الصدمة، الواقعية السحرية، المجاز الديستوبي، الدراسات الحضرية، أدب ما بعد الاستعمار.