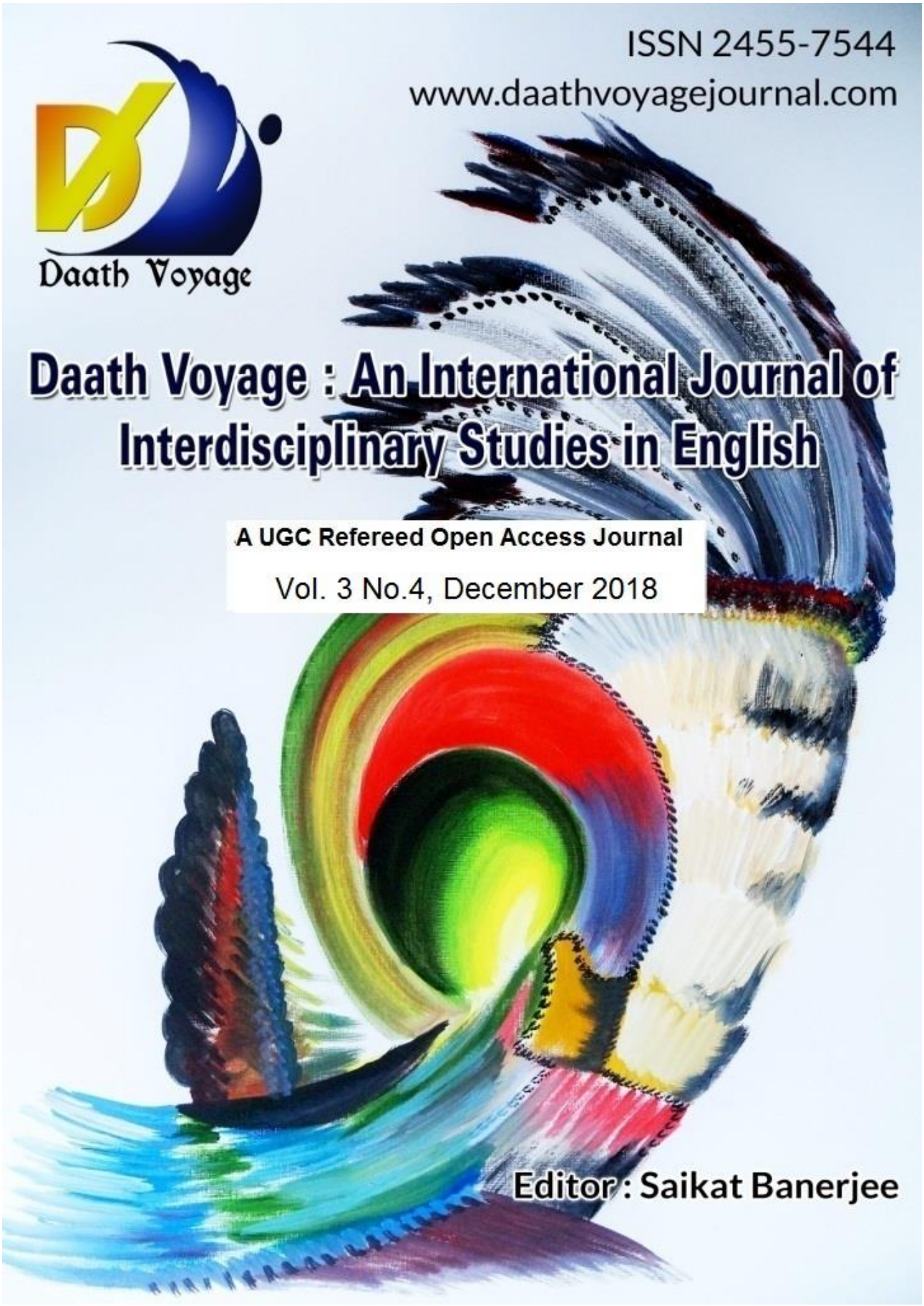

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"Lacerations Brandished like Flags of Defeat:" Trauma of Partition in Ghassan Kanafani's "The Child Goes to the Camp"

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Abstract: The paper explores Ghassan Kanafani's short story "The Child Goes to the Camp" as a trauma narrative. A brief historical account of the Arab-Zionist conflict, critical employment of Jakobson's metaphor/metonymy and Foucault's heterotopia along with a detailed study of violence in the narrative augment the analysis presented in the paper in an aim to conclude that Kanafani's work eschews exact recalling of the traumatic past, and enacts a complex revision and/or a reconstruction of the traumatic experience.

Keywords: Partition, trauma, Ghassan Kanafani, heterotopia, metaphor, metonymy, violence.

Introduction

The Partition of 1948 has had lacerating effects upon innumerable Palestinian Arabs. The war between the Zionists and the Arabs came to a decisive state with the conflicts of 1948 that ushered in the establishment of Israel and caused a massive displacement and suffering of the Arabs. Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) is one of the most notable Palestinian-Arab writers to deal with the trauma of Partition. His short stories "describe the destitution and trauma suffered by stateless Palestinians in the refugee camps after their expulsion in 1948" (Cleary 88). His novel *Men in the Sun* (1962), admired as a significant work in modern Arabic fiction, focuses on the alienation and lack of unity among the displaced Palestinians through a pathetic tale of three men who die in scorching heat trapped inside a water tank. *All that's Left of You* (1966) by Kanafani is set in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip and dramatizes the violent struggles of a sister and brother in the wake of the armed conflict between the Arabs and Zionists. *Umm Sa'ad* (1969) and *Return to*

Haifa (1970), deemed as significant contributions of Kanafani to the body of Palestinian nationalist fiction, seem to deal with the armed revolutionary struggle of the scattered Palestinians hoping to build a national consciousness. Since Kanafani's novels have received greater academic attention than his short stories, this paper attempts at studying one of his "Camp stories" namely "The Child Goes to the Camp" (1967). Evidently, the narrative is set in a refugee camp and explores the trauma of Partition through the perspective of a child.

> These camps were first created in 1950 in order to provide temporary shelter and sustenance for those people who were obliged to flee their homes in Palestine in 1948. They were further populated by another generation of refugees in 1967, following the June War, when the areas now known as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were occupied by Israel. Life in the camps thus acquired a significance over time and a history that has become crucial to the Palestinian experience. The children who came in 1948 gave birth to children of their own, the *awlad al-mukhayyamat* or "children of the camps." This historical significance of the camp life is unavailable, however, to the child narrator of "The Child Goes to the Camp." For him, it was a relentless present, a "time of hostilities " in which finding five pounds in the street while he and his cousin Isam were collecting leftover produce from the market for the family's meal was sufficient to mark a turning point in his day-to-day existence. (Riley and Harlow 15-16)

This paper primarily focuses on Kanafani's treatment of violence and on how it partakes of the trauma of Partition. Invoking the history of the violent struggle of the Palestinian Arabs, the paper explores the narrative in detail in an aim to consider Kanafani's short story as a trauma narrative that evokes the traumatic experience in a curious way. In so doing, the paper employs Roman Jakobson's concept of metaphor and metonymy and Foucault's notion of heterotopia.

The Conflict between Arabs and Zionists

The increasing Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine during the early twentieth century was leveraged by the British colonial administration (Kapitan 9-11).The Arab Movements during the

World Wars which grew strong after the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire, especially at the time of the Arab Revolt of 1936, were manifestations of the burgeoning Palestinian-Arab discontent with the nexus between the Zionists and the British colonialists (Cleary 38-40; Kelly 2; Tauber 80-81). The subsequent mass dispossession of the Palestinians beginning with the Partition of Palestine and establishment of the nation-state of Israel in 1948 exacerbated the factionalism between Zionists and Palestinian Arabs. From the mid twentieth century to the present, Judaization of Palestine has been continuing with consolidation of the state of Israel and the concomitant annihilation, displacement, deprivation and/or diasporization of Palestinian Arabs (Cleary 40; Pappe 66). The disputed territory surrounding Jerusalem acquires centrality in both Palestinian nationalism and Zionism because of factionalist ethno-religious historiographical discourses: Zionists claim to be the "original" inhabitants of the city ("Zion" refers to the biblical hill on which Jerusalem was built) while Palestinian Arabs contend that the land has been their homeland for ages (Kapitan viii). However, the protracted history of Jerusalem in particular and the region known as Israel/Palestine in general is fraught with warfare which consisted of repeated sieges, capturing/recapturing involving several Abrahamic religious groups including Jews, Muslims and Christians. Moreover, the lack of anthropological corroboration in the Zionist claim over the region indicates the cultural politics that had energized Jewish settlement and leveraged the subsequent dispossession and suffering of Palestinians, the Arabic (predominantly Muslim) population that had constituted 95 percent of the demography of the region during the Ottoman rule (6).

Prevailing Violence in the Narrative

Kanafani's short story "The Child Goes to the Camp," as it would be contended, underscores the inextricable link between the periodic, magnanimous violence and the possessory struggle for the "homeland." Violence prevails in the story. Procurement of food in the camps involves physical violence: "We worked all afternoon, Isam and I, struggling with the other children, or the shop owners or the truck drivers, sometimes even with the police" (Kanafani, "The Child" 101). Likewise, physical violence is concomitant with both procurance and possession of the five-pound note:

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> I wanted it more than anything. I bumped up against the policeman's legs with my shoulder so that he fell back in alarm. I lost my balance, but I didn't fall and at that instant— just when the foolish think that it's all over— I saw it. Five pounds. All I had to do was pick it up as I fell. But I got up faster than I fell and I ran faster than I got up. Practically the whole world began to run after me. There was the policeman's whistle and the sound of his shoes pounding on the stones of the street right behind me. Isam screamed.
>
> I was a soldier, fleeing the scene of the battle I had been forced to enter. There was nothing in front of me but to keep running and the world with its shoes was behind me at my heels. (102)

Even when the child reaches home, violence does not cease; his ownership of the five-pound note incurs hostility from the closest quarters:

> They were absolutely furious and lost all control. Everybody was against me. First of all, they just warned me. But I was prepared for even more than that, so they began to hit me. Of course, I couldn't defend myself, and since I was trying as best as I could to protect my pocket with the five pounds in it, it was especially hard for me to ward off.
>
> I remember that I kept the five pounds in my pocket for five weeks. I was looking for the right moment, when the time of hostilities would be over. But whenever this was about to happen, it seemed as if we were getting deeper into hostilities rather than out of them. (103, 105)

Mere possession of the note is significant to the child:

> As long as it was in my pocket it seemed to me like a key that I held in the palm of my hand and that I could use at any time to open the door and walk out. But whenever I got close to the lock I smelled still another time of hostilities behind the door, further away, like going back once more to the beginning. (105)

That it has been procured through violence makes it precious all the more: "I had shed my blood to take the five pounds. I was only sad that I had lost it" (106). Studying the course of violence in the

narrative and the way in which it centres around the five-pound note, it might be argued that the five-pound note as well as the victuals which are begotten daily from the market by theft or seizing is a metaphor for the Palestinian soil, the possession which the Palestinian Arabs have been robbed of. The acquisition and possession of the land of Palestine/Israel are fraught with violence as the region is a seat of historic battles and sieges, settlement and dispossession as noted in the previous section of the paper. Crucial to Kanafani's work, the Partition of 1948 and the subsequent military violence that ensured Zionist supremacy over the region were instrumental in the *al-Nakba* or "Catastrophe" of the Palestinian Arabs (Kapitan 60-62). The dispossession of the five-pound note is also wrapped up in violence; thereby becoming a narrative equivalent of the loss of Palestine:

> While I was trying to grab a bunch of chard which was in front of the wheels of a truck, the truck slowly started to move. At the last minute I slipped and fell underneath it. It was really lucky that the wheels didn't go over my legs, but stopped just as they hit them. In any case, I regained consciousness in the hospital. The first thing I did— as you must have guessed— was to look for the five pounds. But it wasn't there. (Kanafani, "The Child"105-106)

The five-pound note as well as the eatables in the camp is thus procured, possessed/owned and lost through violence: "We fought for our food and then fought each other over how it would be distributed amongst us. Then we fought again." (100). The child's life in the camp is thus always caught in the vortex of violence and hence it can be considered as representative of the violent lives of Palestinian Arabs who suffered because of the Partition of 1948.

Further, it may also be argued that the prevalence of violence in the life of the child constantly undermines his sense of teleology and progression, thereby thwarting the movement in time and space:

> I remember that I kept the five pounds in my pocket for five weeks. I was looking for the right moment, when *the time of hostilities would be over*. But whenever this was about to happen, it seemed as if we were getting deeper into hostilities rather than out of them.
>
> …. As long as it was in my pocket it seemed to me like a key that I held in the palm

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> of my hand and that I could use at any time to open the door and walk out. But whenever I got close to the lock I smelled still another time of hostilities behind the door, further away, like *going back once more to the beginning*. ("The Child" 105; emphasis added).

The indented quotation delineates the child's internal struggle to escape his predicament. His hope for redemption is repeatedly frustrated by the vicious cycle of violence. To survive in the time of hostilities he is bound to adopt violent means (seizing the five-pound note or procuring victuals from the market), only to be engulfed by further hostilities (the police and his family members are after his precious possession). Moreover, the grandfather's obsession with "the latest bad news" published in the newspaper is also indicative of the idea that the time of hostilities (violence) never ends in the camp (99). In this way, the camp denotes a space which is marked by stasis—it does not allow actual movement but only contains recursion in time and space. The child is mostly seen moving between the vegetable market and his house. Likewise he can keep a track of weeks, months and years as well as hope for a better future ("I kept the five pounds in my pocket for five weeks;" "As long as it was in my pocket it seemed to me like a key that I held in the palm of my hand"); but can only feel like "going back once more to the beginning." This constraint on movement in time and space might be considered as a signifier of the actual restriction in movement of Palestinian Arabs after the Partition of 1948. Their movement in their native place came under the control of the Israeli state. In this way, the text engages in the perils of the Palestinian Arabs in the wake of the Partition through a projection of violence in the life of the child.

Metaphor, Metonymy and Heterotopia

It has been contended that the microcosmic procurement and loss of the five-pound note is a metaphor for the macrocosmic possession and dispossession of Palestine. The strife for comestibles among the children of the camp is symbolic of the war between Palestinian Arabs and Zionists over the "homeland" or the "promised land" of which Jerusalem is the ground zero. Moreover, it can also be argued that there is a metonymic association between Kanafani's story and the historical

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Partition. As Roman Jakobson stipulates,

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. (Jakobson 2008, 165)

Metaphorical correspondence between two elements is based on similarity between them; whereas metonymic association between two things depends on adjacency. The recurring violence in the camp which the child encounters is a literary expression of outcomes of the war between Zionists and Palestinian Arabs culminating in the Partition of 1948. Refugee camps were set up during the massive displacement of the Arabs, and Kanafani himself was a victim of this turbulence:

> In 1948, on his twelfth birthday, one of the most egregious events of the Zionist struggle for Palestine took place: the brutal massacre of the residents of an Arab village called Deir Yassin. Anni Kanafani, his widow, writes that Ghassan never celebrated his birthday after that year. Within a month the city of Acre itself fell to Zionist forces, and his family escaped, first to a small village in southern Lebanon, then to the mountains outside Damascus, and finally to a ghetto in Damascus. There, the family's position changed dramatically.
>
> In sudden exile and living in extreme poverty, the Kanafanis believed at first, like all the other Palestinians, that it would only be a matter of weeks, months, or a year at most before the situation would be reversed and they could go home. As a child Ghassan heard other Palestinian children playing in the camps and speaking with compassion of Syrian or Lebanese children, saying, "Poor things, they don't have Palestine to return to."
>
> Reality proved otherwise— it proved to be permanent exile. Ghassan took a keen interest in everything around him in the camps and noted the difference between his actual surroundings and his yearned-for past, and he began to draw and paint as a means of forging a link between that past and his miserable

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present. (Riley 2)

Thus the short story has a metonymic as well as metaphoric connection with the predicament of the dispossessed Palestinians. The child's quandary in the narrative represents a part of Kanafani's experience in reality. At the same time it is a signifier of the tribulations of innumerable Palestinians stemming from the violence of Partition. Concurrently, what one must note is that there is a problematic historicity in the literary text: that is to say, Kanafani never specifies which particular camp he portrays. It can be any camp that accommodated the dispossessed Palestinians. The child-narrator naively says, "It was war-time" only to problematize his narrational authority as well as historicity of the text in the following part of the sentence, "not war really, but hostilities" (Kanafani, "The Child" 99). He then continues:

> [T]o be precise . . . a continued struggle with the enemy. In war the winds of peace gather the combatants to repose, truce, tranquility, the holiday of retreat. But this is not so with hostilities that are always never more than a gunshot away, where you are always walking miraculously between the shots. That's what it was, just as I was telling you, a time of hostilities. (99)

Thus the narration is marked by a problematic historicity. Attuned to this problematic historicity is the discursive dichotomy between the metonymic and metaphoric that animates the relation between the story and the historical plight. The narrative might be an account of a historically specific experience (as regards Kanafani's first-hand experience of the camp life), thereby necessitating its metonymic connection with the actual events. On the other hand, there is a notion that the narrative is an imaginary artistic representation of the real sufferings of the Palestinians. However, what is worth mention is that it does not matter whether it is metonymic or metaphoric, historically well-grounded or not. The most important aspect of the work is that because of its problematic historicity along with its discursively dichotomous enunciation that straddles metaphor and metonymy, the short story seems to attain a crucial, heterogeneous space, a space that might be attuned to what Michel Foucault terms "heterotopia," a place that juxtaposes several places:

> There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are

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> something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. (Foucault and Miskowiec 24)

For Foucault, mirror represents a "virtual space that opens up behind the surface" as well as it "does exist in reality" (24).

> Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (24)

Concurrently, as Foucault argues, "Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies" (26). The actual refugee camp is capable of accommodating multiple spaces as well as times. The real camp which Kanafani witnessed from close quarters is likely to conceive some signifiers of the pre-Partition Palestine (familiar people, customs, ways of life and so on); and it is also probable that the camp envisaged for him a post-Partition Palestine (what the future may hold): he, like several Palestinians, yearned for the past and hoped for a better future. The first-person narrator's definition of those camps that surfaces in another famous short story of Kanafani becomes significant in this context: "The camps. Those stains on the forehead of our weary morning, lacerations brandished like flags of defeat, billowing by chance above the plains of mud and dust and compassion" (Kanafani, "A Present" 44). It was not his real home—it was neither the

Mandatory Palestine nor the Zionist-controlled Palestine; at the same time, it was both. The camp was a constructed space that accommodated the "home" (of both past and future) for several dispossessed Palestinian Arabs, the refugees to the newly formed state of Israel. Thus it was a heterotopia, a place that encompassed signifiers of different times and spaces.

The problematic historicity of the fictional camp in "The Child Goes to the Camp" and the related metaphor/metonymy dichotomy that animates the narrative gain their significance from the contention that the camp in the narrative is a literary counterpart of a heterotopia, a space where several spaces and times coexist. Since it represents a heterogeneous spatio-temporal locale (heterotopias are also heterochronies), the narrative evades historical specificity vacillating between the metaphoric and metonymic. Further, as it escapes historical specificity hovering between metaphor and metonymy, and stands for a heterotopia, it aptly recalls the trauma of Partition.

The Narrative Recalling of the Trauma

Trauma is regarded as incomprehensible and hence nonrepresentational: "The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event,* and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" (Caruth 153).

> Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become…"narrative memory" that is integrated into a completed story of the past. The history that a flashback tells—as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology equally suggest—is, therefore, a history that literally *has no place,* neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence. (153)

The truth of the traumatic event not only depends upon the precision of the event but also lies on the present incomprehensibility of the actual event. However, this apparent incomprehensibility of the traumatic event makes the trauma somewhat comprehensible to the reader if the representative or medium is attuned to it; that is to say, if the element that recalls the trauma tries to access the

historical catastrophe in a particular way.

> Traumatic memory is rarely represented as an exact recalling of events. Rather, the construction of the past includes new details with each telling, or it is constructed from different perspectives, which demonstrates that memories of the traumatic experience are revised and actively rearranged according to the needs of the individual at a particular moment. (Balaev 164)

Therefore, a literary representation of a traumatic experience entails problematic historicity in narration achieved through revision and evocation of the past. Kanafani's "The Child Goes to the Camp," problematizes historicity in recalling the trauma of Partition; but creatively engages the reader in the trauma caused by the cataclysm of several Palestinians including Kanafani. It represents a heterotopia (the camp) closely connected with the outcomes of Partition. Its discursive vacillation between metaphor and metonymy enables the reader to access the ambiguous heterogeneous space in which the trauma of Partition can be recalled. The story thus serves as an access point between a past trauma and present understanding of the traumatic. Kanafani's narrative conjures up an image which is aptly marred by amnesia: the vicious cycle of violence that constrains the child's movement in terms of time and space appositely evokes the trauma of Palestinians in the wake of the Partition of 1948, on the one hand; while the problematic historicity of the image along with the dichotomous enunciation of the heterotopia obfuscates the recalling.

Conclusion

Kanafani's narrative therefore creatively approximates the traumatic past. More importantly, this approximation withholds "graphic, visceral traumatic detail" thereby undermining the notion that the "traumatic experience is a neural-hormonal phenomenon with a genetic imprint in memory" (Balaev 159; sic). The camp is a heterotopia; the narrative lacks historical specificity and straddles between the metaphorical and the metonymic associations with the catastrophe of Partition; besides, the prevailing violence effectuates a recursion of time and space in the narrative. These factors indicate that Kanafani's "The Child Goes to the Camp" eschews exact recalling of the traumatic past; rather, as it has been argued, the work performs a complex revision and/or a reconstruction of

the traumatic experience through an array of historically unspecific, discursively dichotomous, and heterotopic (as well as heterochronic) imagery of violence and suffering.

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