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**“The past goes to sleep, and wakes up inside you”: Identity Crisis  
in Hassan Blasim’s “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes”**

**Abstract**

This article examines “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes,” the last of the fourteen stories that comprise Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim’s collection *The Corpse Exhibition*. In “The Nightmares” Blasim is not concerned at all about depicting the reception of refugees in Europe. As evident in the title itself, what is central to the story is the psychological impacts of war on the individual. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s psychologically-informed theory of the abject, this article attempts to show how the central character in Blasim’s short story situates his ethnic origin as an abject object that he should avoid by all means to be able to bury the traumatizing memories of the war. The article argues that, by situating the crisis of identity in the context of the protagonist’s nightmares, Hassan Blasim manages to articulate the anxieties of exile and the complexity of identity construction particularly for traumatized individuals. Despite his constant denial and avoidance, the central character in the story, Carlos Fuentes, fails to neither construct a hybrid identity nor bury his former self.

*Keywords:* Abject, Exile, Hassan Blasim, Identity, Nightmare realism, Post-2003 Iraqi fiction

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"ينام الماضي ثم يستيقظ بداخلك": أزمة الهوية في قصة حسن بلاسم "كوابيس"  
كارلوس فوينتيس"

مستخلص الدراسة

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يناقش البحث الحالي قصة "كوابيس كارلوس فوينتيس" للكاتب العراقي حسن بلاسم وهي القصة الأخيرة في مجموعته القصصية المترجمة من العربية بعنوان "معرض الجثث وقصص أخرى عن العراق". بشكل عام يناقش الكاتب حسن بلاسم في المجموعة القصصية الأثر النفسي للحرب على الفرد والمجتمع بأكمله. بشكل خاص يطرح البحث الحالي أزمة الهوية التي يمر بها "سالم عبدالحسن" الشخصية الرئيسية في القصة موضوع البحث الذي فرّ لاجئاً إلى هولندا متخذاً لنفسه اسم "كارلوس فوينتيس" رغبة منه في التخلص من هويته العربية. يعالج البحث أزمة الهوية من منظور "الدناءة Abjection" للفيلسوفة البلغارية جوليا كرسنيفا وهو أحد المصطلحات التي تستخدمها القوى العظمى في تهيمش ونبذ مجموعات أو طبقات معينة من الشعوب، وعليه يوضّح البحث كيف استخدم كارلوس فوينتيس منظور الدناءة للتحقير من أصوله العربية محاولاً طمس هويته العراقية وتبني الهوية الأوروبية التي يظنّها أكثر تحضراً. يناقش البحث أيضاً كيف استخدم الكاتب حسن بلاسم "الكابوس" كأسلوب سرد لتوضيح الأزمة النفسية التي يعيشها المهاجر الذي مرّ بتجربة نفسية صادمة لا تُنسى.

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“The past goes to sleep, and wakes up inside you”: Identity Crisis in Hassan Blasim’s

“The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes”

### Introduction

Writing from his exile in Finland, the Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim insists on capturing the horrors of war and its devastating impacts on the lives and psyches of Arabs, despite his confession that he is “not interested in nationalism or religion or any other narrow allegiance” (Ashfeldt and Blasim 12). With stories that are brutal, surreal, and unnatural in their narrative techniques, Blasim was able to attract the attention of “English speaking readers via an unusual route: self-published online in Arabic and collected in book form only upon English translation” (Ashfeldt and Blasim 10). This article focuses on “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes,” the last of the fourteen stories that comprise his collection *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014). In “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” Blasim is not concerned at all about depicting the reception of refugees in Europe. As evident in the title itself, what is central to the story is the psychological impacts of war on the individual. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s psychologically-informed theory of the abject, this article attempts to show how the central character in Blasim’s short story situates his ethnic origin as an abject object that he should avoid by all means to be able to bury the traumatizing memories of the war. The article argues that, by situating the crisis of identity in the context of the protagonist’s nightmares, Blasim manages to articulate the anxieties of exile and the complexity of identity construction, particularly for traumatized individuals.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraqi writers have been “experiencing a measure of freedom of expression hitherto impossible for them” (El-Enany vii). Ever since, both local and diasporic Iraqi writers have been publishing profusely in various genres, particularly the novel and the short story form, “about the years under dictatorship and the successive wars their country has witnessed” (Masmoudi 1). In terms of style, Haytham

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Bahoorra argues that, to articulate the horrors of war, post-2003 Iraqi literature recurs to “the metaphysical, whether through the subconscious, nightmares, or the supernatural” (Bahoorra 185), which will be examined in Blasim’s story shortly. The deposition of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent chaos also had an impact on the themes addressed by Iraqi writers; of particular significance are themes of disillusionment, alienation, and displacement. Quite expectedly, death and images of “decapitations, dismembered limbs, tortured bodies, and charred remains of corpses” (Bahoorra 186) are prevalent in the literature of that era. Two perfect examples to mention here are Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, where a junk-dealer collects scattered body parts and creates a monster that seeks revenge for the innocent victims of the war; and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*, where the business of one corpse washer prospers thanks to the corpses that keep piling due to the war, yet nightmares about his own survival haunt him. Hassan Blasim’s writing, as Rita Sakr argues, “brings together almost all these themes and techniques while distinguishing itself by introducing the crucial variable of the nightmare” (Sakr 769), which is manifest in the title of “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes.”

### **National abjection and the fascination with the foreigner**

In her influential work, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), the Bulgarian philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which elicits feelings of fear, loathing, or repugnance. Simply put, the abject is what makes a person turn or even runs away from a repulsive entity that “threaten[s] the body’s assumed cleanliness, purity, and health” (Mayer 222). Kristeva’s concept of the abject does not merely include disgusting objects such as blood, urine, “a piece of filth, waste, or dung” (Kristeva 2); abjection also exists on the moral level. For Kristeva, the abject could be “The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. . . . Any crime because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject” (4). Thus, the abject

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could be “an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance” or that which “may menace us from the inside” (qtd. in Meagher 33). In spite of being seen as a threat, Kristeva argues that “the abject is necessary since it teaches us how to set up boundaries, for example between self and other or between human and animal” (Felluga 3). The view of the abject as a border between the ‘I’ and ‘not I’ (Barrett 95) is manifest in Carlos Fuentes’s loathing of Arabs, hence of his own being.

In her analysis of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s novels, Kristeva argues that the narrative itself could be described as abject: “Céline’s narrative is a narrative of suffering and horror, not only because the ‘themes’ are there, as such, but because his whole narrative stance seems controlled by the necessity of going through abjection” (Kristeva 140). Similarly, the abjection conveyed through Blasim’s writings is not restricted to the content; it is evident in his writing style. From the opening lines of the “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes,” the narrator gives away the suspense by informing the reader that the central character dies at the end: “In Iraq his name was Salim Abdul Husain, and he worked for the municipality in the cleaning department [ . . . ] He died in Holland in 2009 under another name: Carlos Fuentes” (*The Corpse* 187). After this biographical introduction, the narrative continues normally but a focus on the abject is highlighted from the beginning with three words: “bored,” “disgusted,” and “miserable” (187). The narrator then destabilizes the reader with the sarcastic statement that “Fuentes’s only *lucky* find was *a man’s finger* with a valuable silver ring” (187, emphasis added). By blurring the line between the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, Blasim seems intent on forcing the reader to go through abjection and experience “art-as-trauma” (Arya 194). Exploring the subconscious and the inclusion of psychologically unstable characters are some of the innovative aspects that Blasim employs to provide a sense of abjection that corresponds to his themes.

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According to Kristeva, the corpse, “seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (Kristeva 4). The corpse is what “literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity” (Felluga 4). In other words, the corpse marks the transformation of a human being, a subject, into a mere object. By its very nature then, the corpse as an abject object “gives rise to negative affect – fear, loathing and disgust” (Barrett 94). However, by titling his short story collection, ‘The Corpse Exhibition’, Hassan Blasim represents the corpse as something to be contemplated admiringly at an exhibition, not something to steer clear of. As expected, all the stories in *The Corpse Exhibition* address abjection as a central aspect of post-2003 Iraq. In the title story, killing is depicted as a sophisticated art; the narrator views displaying corpses for others as “the ultimate in the creativity we are seeking” and that “cutting off the client’s limbs and hanging them from the electrical wires in the slum neighborhoods” (*The Corpse* 5) is an outdated method. In another story, “The Army Newspaper,” the protagonist digs up a grave to make sure a certain soldier is “dead enough,” and he does find him “with his decayed body and a hole in his forehead” (*The Corpse* 45-46). Evidently, the normalized and simplistic use of the image of the corpse is intended by Blasim to highlight the commonness and familiarity of corpses in war-torn Iraq.

The status of Arabs as abject objects is emphasized from the very beginning of “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” where the narrator mentions casually that “Salim and his colleagues were sweeping a street market after an oil tanker had exploded nearby, *incinerating* chickens, fruit and vegetables, and *some* people” (*The Corpse* 187, emphasis added). The brilliance and accuracy of the translation of Blasim’s story is evident in the use of the word ‘incinerating’ instead of ‘burning,’ for instance, as the former is used mainly to refer to destroying waste material by burning (USA EPA). Blasim purposefully adds “some people” to the end of the list of the incinerated garbage of “chickens, fruit and vegetables” to

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establish Arabs as “waste populations” (Tyler 20). The protagonist of Blasim’s story, Salim Abdul Husain, is an Iraqi municipal worker whose job is “to clear up in the aftermath of explosions” (*The Corpse* 187). While doing his job, Salim competes with his coworkers to collect body parts that still have valuables, gold rings or watches, clinging to them:

His only lucky find was a man’s finger with a valuable silver ring of great beauty. Salim put his foot over the finger, bent down carefully, and with disgust pulled the silver ring off. [. . .] The ring ended up on Salim’s finger; he would contemplate the gemstone in surprise and wonder, and in the end he abandoned the idea of selling it” (*The Corpse* 187-8).

Once he manages to flee Iraq to Holland as an asylum seeker, Salim Abdul Husain changes his name to Carlos Fuentes because “It’s a hundred times better to be from Senegal or China than it is to have an Arab name in Europe” (*The Corpse* 188). Eager to embrace his new identity, “Fuentes wasted no time. He joined classes to learn Dutch and promised himself he would not speak Arabic from then on, or mix with Arabs or Iraqis, whatever happened in life. ‘Had enough of misery, backwardness, death, shit, piss, and camels’” (*The Corpse* 188). Because his encounters with Arabs, i.e., the abject, would jeopardize his pursuit of a new subjectivity, Carlos Fuentes “must reject the abject in order to be able to define and defend the boundaries of [his] identity” (Kutzbach & Mueller 9).

As Kristeva argues, what causes abjection is that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). For Fuentes, associating himself with Arabs or everything related to them, hinders his concentrated efforts to “undefine his initial self so as to develop a new sense of self” (Agbo 59). Thus, because “the abject source threatens the subject’s sense of self” (Arya 5), Fuentes works hard to rid himself of his ethnic heritage and to adopt instead the identity of the foreigner which he sees as superior. Although the conflict between national and personal identity is at the heart of “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes,” Blasim pays more attention to

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the inner conflicts that migrants who try to fit in the host culture go through. In his study of the trauma of exile, Joshua Agbo argues that the exile/refugee, in a desperate attempt to find a new homeland, “constructs his or her sense of symbolic belonging in the new home through the forging of a new national identity so as to fend off the sense of loss and emotional attachment to the original homeland” (16). But Carlos Fuentes has no exilic consciousness nor does he have a sense of alienation. To the contrary, Fuentes is instantly enchanted by “the paradise that is Europe,” as Blasim calls it in one of his poems<sup>1</sup>:

“Look how clean the streets are! Look at the toilet seat; it’s sparkling clean! Why can’t we eat like them? We gobble down our food as though it’s about to disappear. [. . .] Why are the trees so green and beautiful, as though they’re washed with water every day? Why can’t we be peaceful like them? We live in houses like pigsties while their houses are warm, safe, and colorful. Why do they respect dogs as much as humans? (*The Corpse* 189).

By allowing Fuentes a smooth and swift transition from his own culture to the host culture, Blasim counters the mainstream representation of migrants as alienated and displaced subjects and offers a counter argument to Edward Said’s notion of the inhumanity of exile.

The cultural theorist Georges Bataille, who theorized about abjection well before Kristeva, argues that “abjection is the imperative force of sovereignty, a founding exclusion which constitutes a part of the population as moral outcasts” (Tyler 19). As such, “abjection can be viewed as the primer or safeguard of culture” (Barrett 95). To feel superior, and to be counted as a citizen of the sovereign nations, Fuentes readily adopts their “processes of inclusion and exclusion,” hence views Arabs as “waste populations” (Tyler 20). To prove himself worthy of the supposedly superior European identity, Fuentes “worked nonstop, paid his taxes, and refused to live on welfare. The highlight of his efforts to integrate his mind and



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spirit into Dutch society came when he acquired a good-hearted Dutch girlfriend who loved and respected him” (*The Corpse* 190). Because of his extraordinary achievements, Fuentes

felt he was the only one who deserved to be adopted by this compassionate and tolerant country, and that the Dutch government should expel all those who did not learn the language properly and anyone who committed the slightest misdemeanor [. . .] Let them go shit there in their shitty countries. [. . .] he always introduced himself as someone of Mexican origin whose father had left his country and settled in Iraq to work as an engineer with the oil companies. Carlos liked to describe the Iraqi people as an uncivilized and backward people who did not know what humanity means. ‘They are just savage clans,’ he would say. (*The Corpse* 190).

As this quotation makes clear, Fuentes’s new identity as a Dutch citizen entitles him to unconsciously embrace the colonial mindset of Europe that used to “strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste” (Tyler 21). Fuentes’s new perception of Arabs as “The low-Other” (qtd. in Tyler 20) justifies his sense of ‘disgust’ and, accordingly, his insistence on keeping away from everything that reminds him of his ethnic origin.

### **The Nightmare as a narrative technique**

“The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” is a perfect example of what Hassan Blasim calls “‘nightmare realism’” (Sakr 767). To “highlight the terror of the everyday and the residues of unspeakable acts of brutality in those who experience or witness them” (Bahooora 188), Blasim recurs in his fiction to the metaphysical and the supernatural to depict what is indescribable by realistic measures. In the entire collection of *The Corpse Exhibition*, Blasim employs several narrative techniques that perplex the reader as to the reliability of the narrator and the credibility of the narrative itself; in “An Army Newspaper” a dead man is

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brought back to life to confess his crime in front of a judge. In “Crosswords” Blasim employs multiple unreliable narrators, including the spirit of a burnt man; in “The Hole” the reader encounters cannibal/jinni narrators within unconventional time frames; and finally an insane narrator is at the center of “The Madman of Freedom Square.” In “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” Blasim uses the nightmare to best represent the protagonist’s traumatizing memories of his life in Iraq that keep haunting his present. As Kristeva explains, the abject is “the ‘other’ that comes from within (so it is part of ourselves) that we have to reject and expel in order to protect our boundaries. We are unable to rid ourselves of it completely and it continues to haunt our being” (Arya 4). In this sense, despite seeing Arabs as abject objects that he should keep away from, Fuentes’s subconscious is populated with abjection. Because of “the inevitability of encounters with the abject” (Mayer 222), Fuentes remains haunted by his ethnic identity no matter how hard he avoids it.

In her study of the connotations of sleep in medieval literature, Megan G. Leitch argues that “Dreams offer access to different types of knowledge, including supernatural visions (whether divine or demonic) and revelations of external truths (such as prophecies), but also to a dreamer’s past or embodied preoccupations” (74). Sleep also signifies vulnerability and lack of control on the part of the sleeper who cannot choose the content of his/her dreams. In Blasim’s story, sleep is not merely a marker of inactivity or a pause in the plot. To the contrary, it is where the conflict of the story unfolds. In his lecture on the world of dreams, French philosopher Henri Bergson insists that “The fullness of our mental life is in our dreams, but with a minimum of tension, effort, and bodily movement” (51). Despite the seemingly perfect new life that Fuentes manages to secure for himself, “the dream problem began and everything fell to pieces” (*The Corpse* 191). In the course of the story, Fuentes is haunted by a series of distressing nightmares. In the first of these nightmares,

he was unable to speak Dutch. He was standing in front of his Dutch boss and

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speaking to him in an Iraqi dialect, which caused him great concern and a horrible pain in his head. He would wake up soaked in sweat, then burst into tears. (*The Corpse* 191)

Undoubtedly, migrants usually feel uncertain about their fluency and whether native speakers would be able to understand their foreign accent or not. Therefore, the first problem that they encounter in their host countries is language proficiency. This indeed explains Fuentes's insistence in whitewashing his 'abject' identity by becoming proficient in Dutch, not speaking Arabic ever again, and "[enrolling] in numerous courses on Dutch culture and history" (*The Corpse* 190). Because it is through their foreign accent that migrants get to "project their identity in the world" (Dyer 101), Carlos Fuentes does his best to repress it.

The highlight of Fuentes's success in his process of acculturation is his proficiency in the foreign language. In this sense, his inability to speak Dutch in his dream and being forced to speak Arabic implies, as Kristeva convincingly argues, that it is impossible to "entirely [rid] ourselves of abjection" (Arya 4), which is reflected on Fuentes's psyche. Given that the war stands as the main backdrop of Blasim's stories, Fuentes's dreams fit more in the category of war nightmares and as such they are "exceptions to [Freud's] theory of libido and wish fulfillment" (Wilmer 85). However, similar to the repressed desires that Freud argues express themselves in the form of dreams, what distresses Fuentes in his first dream is clearly the return of his repressed identity that is marked essentially by his use of Arabic. The alienation that he as an exile suppresses in reality, comes to haunt him in the dreams that

continued to assail him without mercy. In his dreams he saw a group of children in the poor district where he was born, running after him and making fun of his new name. They were shouting after him and clapping: "Carlos the coward, Carlos the sissy, Carlos the silly billy." (*The Corpse* 191)

Evidently, what is targeted in Fuentes's nightmares are the markers of his new identity as a

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Dutch citizen, i.e., the foreign language and the foreign name. This in fact corresponds with what Kristeva maintains, that “we are, despite everything, continually and repetitively drawn to the abject (much as we are repeatedly drawn to trauma in Freud’s understanding of repetition compulsion)” (Felluga 4).

Another nightmare that Fuentes experiences, reflects yet another marker of the stereotypical identity of Arabs as perceived in the West, that is of a terrorist:

One night he dreamt that he had planted a car bomb in the center of Amsterdam. He was standing in the courtroom, ashamed and embarrassed. The judges were strict and would not let him speak Dutch, with the intent to humiliate and degrade him. They fetched him an Iraqi translator, who asked him not to speak in his incomprehensible rustic accent, which added to his agony and distress. (*The Corpse* 191-2)

Although Carlos Fuentes denies the presence of any psychological dilemma for him as a migrant who escapes a war-torn homeland, he evidently has an identity crisis that is reflected on a subconscious level. In reality, Fuentes seems to be entirely content with his new identity and insists on burying his former identity that keeps surfacing in his dreams. This internal conflict heightens in his dreams where he is forced to remember his former identity as an Arab/terrorist. In the dream mentioned above, he seems to be quite aware that he is Carlos Fuentes, the exemplary Dutch citizen; yet subconsciously he, as an Arab, commits a terrorist act that he is “ashamed and embarrassed” of. A terrorist is not expected to feel embarrassed or ashamed of his acts; to the contrary, a terrorist usually commits his acts in defense of a certain belief or cause and hence the typical feelings in a courtroom would be those of pride and defiance. Thus, in his dream, Carlos Fuentes behaves like his Arab self, i.e., Salim Abdul Husain, but he simultaneously feels like a good Dutch citizen who is ashamed of what Arabs do, supposedly, instinctively.

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The indexicality of language and its significance to the identity of migrants is stressed again in this nightmare. As much as he brags about his proficiency in Dutch, which he sees as a superior language, Fuentes's nightmares seem to be all about stripping him of the Dutch language and allowing him only the language that he despises and vows not to use ever again because it reminds him of his ethnic identity. Thus, Fuentes is forced in his nightmares to retrieve "The abject from which he does not cease separating" himself (Kristeva 8). By associating Fuentes's agony and humiliation with his being forced to speaking Arabic, Blasim seems to be stressing the centrality of language as a crucial marker of ethnic identity. In his attempts to get rid of his nightmares, Fuentes starts to read about how dreams work and, in the process, he learns "that eating any root vegetable would probably be the cause of dreams related to a person's past and roots" (*The Corpse* 193). The more he reads about dreams, the more he modifies his eating and sleeping habits. But then

His ambition went beyond getting rid of troublesome dreams; he had to control the dreams, to modify them, purge them of all their foul air, and integrate them with the salubrious rules of life in Holland. The dreams must learn the new language of the country so that they could incorporate new images and ideas. All the old gloomy and miserable faces had to go. (*The Corpse* 193)

Getting into the realm of the subconscious represents Blasim's highest point of experimentalism where he "departs from narrative realism by constructing fantastic narratives [. . .] suggesting the impossibility of realistically rendering the experience [. . .] and implying that the Iraqi reality is itself monstrous and irrational" (Bahoora 188). There is no mention in the story that Carlos Fuentes has experienced violence himself; he was not imprisoned or tortured. But he has been a witness to the violence that devastated Iraq. Not only that, he has been an active tool for the management of violence since his main job was to clean after the bombings and collect scattered body parts. Certainly, this normalization of violence and

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brutality scars Fuentes's psyche and leads him to think that he can eradicate all his memories and start anew. Blasim here is stressing the impossibility of constructing an entirely new identity because our memories manifest themselves in one way or another.

In his foundational text *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud states that "if during sleep an organ is in a state of activity, excitation or disturbance, the dream will produce images related to the performance of the function which is discharged by the organ concerned" (69). Having read many books on dreams, Carlos Fuentes decides to make use of this characteristic of dreams by "sleeping in a military uniform with a toy plastic rifle by his side [. . .] so that he could sweep out all the rubbish of the unconscious" (*The Corpse* 194-195). As desired, Fuentes experiences what Aristotle describes as a "lucid dream" where the sleeper is aware that he/she is dreaming, which "in the modern canon of dream theory is linked with high levels of consciousness, self-awareness, and dream thinking" (Rheinschmiedt 204). In the last of his dreams, Carlos Fuentes

was standing in front of the door to an old building that looked as though it had been ravaged by fire in its previous life. The building was in central Baghdad. [. . .] Fuentes broke through the door of the building and went into one flat after another, mercilessly wiping out everyone inside. Even the children did not survive the bursts of bullets. (*The Corpse* 195)

As this quotation makes clear, Blasim uses nightmares as "reminders of the distant past and of [. . .] [Fuentes's] ethnic identity" (Rheinschmiedt 53), that is, the abjection that he longs to be detached from. The brutality of life in post-2003 Iraq, which is the main reason for Fuentes's migration, is repeated in his dream; but it is him who kills the innocents randomly, not American soldiers or freedom fighters. The repetitive return of the abject confirms Julia Kristeva's understanding of abjection as "a vital and determinative process in the formation of the subject" (Arya 2). Because the memories of his life in Iraq are essential components of

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his identity, they cannot be obliterated.

The building that Fuentes ravages in this last dream might be taken to represent the municipality for which he used to work, which in turn represents the entire of Iraq, the repository of all his past memories. The wish-fulfillment of Fuentes's last nightmare lies in his ability to shoot everyone in that building, and thus get rid of his past. But as Kristeva argues, "The abject does not cease challenging its master [. . .], it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out" (2). Indeed, for Carlos Fuentes the abject presents "an experience of unmatched primordial horror, putting [him] in the most devastating kind of crisis imaginable" (Becker-Leckrone 20). Yet the one thing that Fuentes needs to challenge and eradicate in this dream is his own former identity as Salim Abdul Husain:

on the sixth floor a surprise hit him when he stormed the first apartment and found himself face-to-face with Salim Abdul Husain! Salim was standing naked next to the window, holding *a broom stained with blood*. With a trembling hand Fuentes aimed his rifle at Salim's head. Salim began to smile and repeated in derision, 'Salim the Dutchman, Salim the Mexican, Salim the Iraqi, Salim the Frenchman, Salim the Indian, Salim the Pakistani, Salim the Nigerian.' (*The Corpse* 195, emphasis added)

Fuentes's former identity as a local cleaner is represented by the abject, i.e., the blood-stained broom. It is evident here that Fuentes is traumatized by his job that forced him to deal with violently dismembered bodies on a daily basis. "This self-witnessing of violence stages a relationship between embodied and disembodied violence, between the terror of violence inflicted on the physical self and the concurrent psychic processing of the event" (Bahoora 185). By associating the name of Salim with all these diverse nationalities, Blasim implies that his ethnic identity would remain stuck with him no matter where he lives or how he behaves. According to Cathy Caruth, "The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to [. . .] master what was

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never fully grasped in the first place. (62). Obviously, Fuentes becomes aware of the impossibility of grasping the unspeakable violence and inhumanity in his life in Iraq only when he leaves Iraq seeking a new life in Europe, which corresponds with Caruth's notion of the belatedness of trauma (Caruth 7). Therefore, Fuentes's nightmares are manifestations of the repressed, traumatizing memories that he tries so hard to avoid because he is incapable of processing them.

The way that Blasim ends Fuentes's last nightmare, and life, blurs the line between dream and reality, hence disorients the reader:

Fuentes's nerves snapped and he panicked. He let out a resounding scream and started to spray Salim Abdul Husain with bullets, but Salim jumped out the window and not a single bullet hit him. When Fuentes's wife woke up to the scream and stuck her head out the window, Carlos Fuentes was dead on the pavement, and a pool of blood was spreading slowly under his head. (*The Corpse* 195)

As Yasmien Hanoosh suggests, "The strangeness with which the work of many contemporary Iraqi writers at once rivets and disorients the reader is perhaps the best metaphor for the incongruity of modern Iraq's cultural and political history" (2013). The reader is instantly shocked and bewildered when he/she realizes that Fuentes actually wakes up and in a blink of an eye jumps off the window of his apartment in Amsterdam, exactly as Salim Abdul Husain does in the context of the nightmare. By insisting on wiping out his former self, Fuentes ends up killing himself because "abjection destabilizes the boundary between self and the other, thereby threatening identity" (Arya 165) and the body. When Carlos Fuentes insists on forgetting the past and "burying his identity" (*The Corpse* 189), his mind fails to process this forced uprootedness and his whole life falls to pieces.

### Conclusion

Hassan Blasim is "a filmmaker, poet, and fiction writer, who, persecuted under Saddam



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Hussein, fled Baghdad in 1998” (*Publishers Weekly*). The fact that Blasim is writing from his exile stories that show the routine nature of violence and brutality in Iraq, implies that Europe is not really a ‘paradise’ for Iraqi migrants who would always be haunted by the brutality they have witnessed or experienced firsthand. In his short story about a migrant who longs to escape his past, Blasim uses the “‘disgusting’ or unaesthetic” to provide “insights into the instability and the fragmentary nature of the self” (Kutzbach & Mueller 7). Generally speaking, Blasim’s work is the exemplar of contemporary Iraqi fiction that was shaped by the horrifying experience of the war and the chaos that still prevails in Iraq. This article spots light on the devastating psychological impacts of war and migration on an Iraqi emigrant who leaves his homeland and vows not to return. Carlos Fuentes glorifies Europe and establishes Arabs as an ‘abject’ people whom he has to shun. He refuses to accept the fact that his past is an undeletable component of his identity, which precipitates his end. To get rid of his former identity as Salim Abdul Hussain, Carlos Fuentes kills himself of despair. In their merciless war against each other, both Salim and Carlos Fuentes “end up on the same side, united in abomination” (Kristeva 144).

Unlike conventional narratives of migration, questions of belonging, displacement, and nostalgia do not take center stage in “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes.” And even though Blasim seems to be idealizing exile by portraying Europe as a paradise, he ends up countering this by emphasizing how obliterating the past is impossible since memory is “the means through which our existence is made continuous” (Baskin 13). Through the character of Carlos Fuentes, Blasim parallels two different cultures to highlight the inadequacies of his own culture. There is a sense of internal fragmentation that is manifested in his representation of Carlos Fuentes who, despite his constant denial and avoidance, fails to neither construct a hybrid identity nor bury his former self.

Blasim’s narrative style shows several shifts throughout the course of the story; for

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instance, the narrator begins the story biographically, proceeds naturally, and then ends metafictionally. Overall, there is a sense of orality in Blasim's narrative technique. Consider the last few sentences of the story:

The most beautiful part of the Carlos Fuentes story, however, is the image captured by an amateur photographer who lived close to the scene of the incident. [. . .] the only part that protruded from under the blue sheet was his outstretched right hand. The picture was in black and white, but the stone in the ring on Carlos Fuentes's finger glowed red in the foreground, like a sun in hell. (*The Corpse* 196).

In this sarcastic comment about the ironic ending of the protagonist's life, Blasim minimizes the story of Carlos Fuentes to a casual report in the newspaper about "an *Iraqi* man [who] had committed suicide at night by jumping from a sixth-floor window" (*The Corpse* 196). Although Fuentes is officially a Dutch citizen, Blasim here implies that he would be always identified as an Iraqi. Fuentes thus ends where he began: in Iraq where his brothers take his body to bury, and wearing that same ring which he took from the 'other finger' he found before leaving Iraq. By zooming in on Fuentes's finger, Blasim manages to highlight the fragmented identity of Iraq and Iraqis.

### Notes

1. "A Refugee in the Paradise that is Europe" is a poem by Hassan Blasim that was translated from Arabic by Jonathan Wright. See: Hassan Blasim & Jonathan Wright.

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