



Ontological Instability in Hasan Blāsim's 'Al-Ḥafrah': McHale's Postmodernist Fiction Analysis

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 20/05, 2026

Revised 07/08, 2026

Accepted 09/08, 2026

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the short story "al-Ḥafrah" by Ḥasan Blāsim using Brian McHale's theory of postmodern fiction. Previous studies on Blāsim's fiction have predominantly examined themes of war, trauma, violence, exile, and refugee experience, while comparatively little attention has been paid to the narrative mechanisms through which his fiction reconstructs reality. Addressing this gap, this article investigates how ontological instability is constructed in the short story "al-Ḥafrah" through the framework of Brian McHale's postmodern fiction theory. The study employs qualitative textual analysis of "al-Ḥafrah", one of the twenty-five stories in *Ma'raḍ al-Juṣaṣ*, using words, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogues as units of analysis. Seven textual excerpts were identified through repeated close reading and analyzed through five analytical dimensions: fictional representation, historical context, McHale's theoretical conceptualization, textual interpretation, and empirical plausibility. The analysis demonstrates that the hole functions not merely as a narrative setting but as an ontological device that connects multiple fictional worlds and destabilizes conventional boundaries of space, time, identity, and reality. This ontological instability is produced through postmodernist narrative strategies, including spatial juxtaposition, interpolation, misattribution, and recursive structure, which collectively transform war, migration, and historical memory into interconnected ontological conditions rather than isolated historical events. These findings extend discussions of Blāsim's fiction beyond thematic readings of conflict and exile by demonstrating how postmodern narrative techniques reconstruct reality itself. The study therefore contributes to both McHale's postmodern narratology and contemporary scholarship on Iraqi war literature by foregrounding ontological instability as a central mechanism of literary representation.

Keywords:

Ontological-
Instability
Al-Hafrah
Postmodernist
Fiction
Hasan Blasim
McHale

تجريد

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل القصة القصيرة "الحفرة" لحسن بلاسيم باستعمال نظرية السرد ما بعد الحداثي عند براين ماكهيل. ركزت الدراسات السابقة حول أعمال بلاسيم السردية في الغالب على موضوعات الحرب، والصدمة، والعنف، والمنفى، وتجربة اللجوء، في حين لم تحظ الآليات السردية التي يُعيد من خلالها تشييد الواقع باهتمام مماثل. وانطلاقاً من هذه الفجوة، تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تشكّل عدم الاستقرار الأنطولوجي في القصة القصيرة «الحفرة» في ضوء نظرية بريان ماكهيل في السرد ما

بعد الحداثي. وتعتمد الدراسة على التحليل النصي الكيفي لقصة «الحفرة»، وهي واحدة من خمسين وعشرين قصة في مجموعة «معرض الجثث»، متخذةً من الكلمات والجمل والفقرات والمجاذبات كوحداتٍ للتحليل. وقد جرى تحديد سبعة مقاطع نصية من خلال القراءة المتكررة المتأنية، ثم تحليلها وفق خمسة أبعاد تحليلية هي: التمثيل التخيلي، والسياق التاريخي، والتأطير النظري عند ماكهيل، والتفسير النصي، وإمكان التحقق التجريبي. وتُظهر نتائج التحليل أن الحفرة لا تؤدي وظيفة فضاءٍ سردي فحسب، بل تعمل بوصفها أداةً أنطولوجية تربط بين عوالم تخيلية متعددة وتزعزع الحدود التقليدية للمكان والزمان والهوية والواقع. وينتج هذا الاضطراب الأنطولوجي عن استراتيجيات سردية ما بعد حداثية تشمل المجاورة المكانية، والإقحام، وإعادة إسناد الصفات، والبنية التكرارية، وهي استراتيجيات تحوّل الحرب والهجرة والذاكرة التاريخية إلى حالات أنطولوجية مترابطة بدلاً من كونها أحداثاً تاريخية منفصلة. وتوسّع هذه النتائج آفاق دراسة أعمال بلاسيم السردية متجاوزةً القراءات الموضوعاتية للصراع والمنفى، وذلك من خلال بيان الكيفية التي تعيد بها تقنيات السرد ما بعد الحداثي تشييد الواقع ذاته. ومن ثم، تُسهّم هذه الدراسة في كلّ من دراسات السرد ما بعد الحداثي عند ماكهيل والبحوث المعاصرة حول أدب الحرب العراقي، من خلال إبراز عدم الاستقرار الأنطولوجي بوصفه آليةً مركزيةً للتمثيل الأدبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

عدم الاستقرار
الأنطولوجي
الحفرة
السرد ما بعد الحداثي
حسن بلاسيم
ماكهيل

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis cerpen "*al-Hafrah*" karya Hasan Blāsim menggunakan teori Brian McHale tentang fiksi posmodernis. Penelitian-penelitian terdahulu mengenai karya sastra Hasan Blasim pada umumnya berfokus pada tema-tema perang, trauma, kekerasan, eksil, dan pengalaman pengungsi, sementara mekanisme naratif yang digunakan karya-karyanya untuk merekonstruksi realitas masih relatif jarang mendapat perhatian. Berangkat dari kesenjangan tersebut, artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana ketidakstabilan ontologis dikonstruksi dalam cerpen "*al-Hafrah*" melalui kerangka teori fiksi postmodern Brian McHale. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis tekstual kualitatif terhadap cerpen "*al-Hafrah*", salah satu dari dua puluh lima cerpen dalam antologi *Ma'raḍ al-Juṣaṣ*, dengan kata, kalimat, paragraf, dan dialog sebagai unit analisis. Sebanyak tujuh kutipan tekstual diidentifikasi melalui *close reading* secara berulang, kemudian dianalisis berdasarkan lima dimensi analisis, yaitu representasi dunia fiksional, konteks historis, konseptualisasi teoretis menurut McHale, interpretasi tekstual, dan kemungkinan empiris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lubang tidak sekadar berfungsi sebagai latar naratif, melainkan sebagai perangkat ontologis yang menghubungkan berbagai dunia fiksional sekaligus mendestabilisasi batas-batas konvensional ruang, waktu, identitas, dan realitas. Ketidakstabilan ontologis tersebut dibangun melalui strategi naratif postmodern berupa penjajaran spasial, interpolasi, misatribusi, dan struktur rekursif yang secara kolektif mentransformasikan perang, migrasi, dan memori historis menjadi kondisi-kondisi ontologis yang saling terhubung, bukan sekadar peristiwa-peristiwa sejarah yang berdiri sendiri. Temuan ini memperluas kajian terhadap karya sastra Hasan Blasim melampaui pembacaan tematik mengenai konflik dan eksil dengan menunjukkan bagaimana teknik-teknik naratif postmodern merekonstruksi realitas itu sendiri. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini berkontribusi terhadap pengembangan naratologi postmodern Brian McHale sekaligus kajian kontemporer mengenai sastra perang Irak melalui penegasan ketidakstabilan ontologis sebagai mekanisme utama representasi sastra.

Kata kunci:

Ketidakstabilan
Ontologis
Al-Hafrah
Fiksi Pascamodernis
Hasan Blasim
McHale

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A. Introduction

The reconstruction of reality through the coexistence of multiple worlds has become one of the defining characteristics of postmodern fiction (Benson & S, 2025; Esfahani et al., 2024; Tupan & M.-A, 2023). Recent studies in Arabic literary scholarship likewise demonstrate that narrative form, social reality, identity, and contemporary literary change are closely connected (Finanti & A, 2024; Noviana & K., 2024; Putri & Z., 2024; Saputra et al., 2025). That gives rise to what postmodern narratology identifies as ontological instability, which is a condition in which the boundaries separating realities become uncertain, fragmented, and continually reconfigured. Rather than representing a single, coherent world, postmodern narratives frequently juxtapose incompatible realities, allowing different worlds, identities, and temporalities to intersect within the same narrative space (Mchale & B, 1987). This narrative tendency has become particularly significant in contemporary literary representations of war, displacement, and exile, where the experience of violence often exceeds the explanatory capacity of realist discourse (Demeyer et al., 2021; Golden & A., 2021). Within this context, the fiction of Ḥasan Blāsim has attracted increasing international attention for its innovative combination of horror, absurdity, and surrealism in portraying the fractured realities of post-war Iraq and forced migration (Fox & R., 2023; Mousa et al., 2022). One of the stories that exemplifies this narrative strategy is "*al-Ḥafrah*", included in the anthology *Ma'rad al-Juṣaṣ*. The story follows a protagonist who loots a warehouse while fleeing an ambush by three armed masked men before falling into a hole at the edge of a garden near the Natural History Museum. More than a physical setting, the hole functions as a liminal narrative space where multiple realities repeatedly intersect and transform one another, generating ontological instability throughout the narrative. Although previous studies have primarily examined Blāsim's fiction in relation to war, trauma, violence, and exile, less attention has been devoted to the narrative mechanisms through which ontological instability is constructed (Hanoosh & Y, 2019; Knudsen et al., 2022; Sellman & J, 2022). Therefore, "*al-Ḥafrah*" provides a productive case for examining how postmodern narrative strategies reconstruct reality through

ontological instability within the framework of McHale's postmodern fiction theory. (Francisco et al., 2025; James & K, 2024; Qiu & B, 2024; Sadek & R, 2023; Yaseen & M, 2024)

McHale's theory of postmodern fiction provides the principal analytical framework for examining how literary narratives reconstruct reality through ontological instability rather than epistemological inquiry. According to McHale (1987), the defining feature of postmodern fiction is the shift from the *epistemological dominant*, which characterizes modernist fiction by asking questions about the limits and reliability of knowledge, to the *ontological dominant*, which foregrounds questions concerning the existence, interaction, and boundaries of multiple worlds (Mchale & B, 1987). This shift reflects the postmodern rejection of a single, universal reality and instead conceives reality as plural, fragmented, and continually reconstructed (Dillard & A, 1982). Consequently, postmodern narratives no longer seek to determine what is true within one coherent world; rather, they explore how different worlds coexist, overlap, collide, and destabilize one another. This emphasis on narrative structure is consistent with recent work that treats literary narratives as constructed systems whose meanings emerge through plot organization, perspective, representation, and social context (Chilwina et al., 2025; Chusna & N., 2025; Ina et al., 2025). Such ontological instability is commonly manifested through anti-realist narrative strategies, including the juxtaposition of multiple realities, the construction and deconstruction of narrative spaces, and the continual reproduction of alternative worlds (Ibsch & E, 1982). These strategies correspond to what Higgins (1978) identifies as a "post-cognitive" orientation, expressed in questions such as "Which world is this?", "What is to be done in it?", and "Which of my selves is to do it?" In this study (Higgins & D, 1978), McHale's concept of the ontological dominant is operationalized by examining how "*al-Hafrah*" constructs the hole as a liminal narrative space where multiple realities intersect, how the protagonist's encounters destabilize the boundaries between these realities, and how such ontological reconstruction reshapes the narrative logic of the story. Through this analytical framework, the study investigates not merely the representation of war and displacement, but the narrative mechanisms by which Blāsim reconstructs reality itself. (James & K, 2024; Masood et al., 2025; Qiu & B, 2024)

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study examines the narrative construction of Ḥasan Blāsim's "*al-Hafrah*" to explain how the story reconstructs reality through ontological instability. To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How is the narrative structure of "*al-Hafrah*" configured to construct multiple

fictional worlds? (2) How do the postmodern narrative strategies of spatial juxtaposition, interpolation, misattribution, and recursive embedding contribute to the construction of ontological instability within the story? By addressing these questions, the study aims to demonstrate how Blāsim employs postmodern narrative techniques not merely to represent war and displacement but to reconstruct the ontology of reality itself. (Mabrouk & B, 2024; Yaseen & M, 2024)

The narrative analysis of "*al-Ḥafrah*" by Ḥasan Blāsim is conducted using McHale's theory of postmodern fiction. Previous scholarship has examined Blāsim's fiction primarily within the contexts of Iraqi war literature, trauma, displacement, and refugee experience. Studies by Golden (2021) and Fox (2023) demonstrate how Blāsim employs grotesque and horrific narrative forms to represent the violence of war, human rights violations, and the psychological consequences of forced migration (Fox & R., 2023; Golden & A., 2021). Similarly, research on Iraqi fiction in diaspora and migration literature has emphasized questions of identity, exile, border crossing, and the socio-historical dimensions of displacement (Hanoosh & Y, 2019; Knudsen et al., 2022; Mousa et al., 2022; Sellman & J, 2022). While these studies have significantly contributed to understanding the political, ethical, and cultural dimensions of Blāsim's work, they tend to privilege thematic concerns over the narrative mechanisms through which reality itself is constructed and destabilized. At the same time, recent developments in postmodern narratology have extended McHale's foundational proposition concerning the ontological dominant by examining the roles of perspective, affect, and possible worlds in the production of fictional realities (Benson & S, 2025; Demeyer et al., 2021; Esfahani et al., 2024; Tupan & M.-A, 2023). These studies collectively suggest that contemporary fiction increasingly constructs meaning through the interaction of multiple worlds and competing realities rather than through a stable representation of a single reality. Nevertheless, despite the growing scholarly interest in both Blāsim's fiction and postmodern narrative theory, little attention has been devoted to the ways ontological instability is narratively produced in "*al-Ḥafrah*". Recent Arabic literary studies also show that conflict, resistance, social criticism, and cultural identity can be encoded through narrative, stylistic, and symbolic structures rather than through thematic representation alone (Fikri et al., 2025; Hasri et al., 2025; Hikmah & Purnamawati, 2026b; Siregar et al., 2024). In particular, the functions of spatial juxtaposition, interpolation, misattribution, and recursive embedding as mechanisms for constructing multiple realities remain underexplored. Therefore, this study positions itself at the intersection of Iraqi war

literature and postmodern narratology by examining how these narrative strategies generate ontological instability and reconstruct reality in Blāsīm's short story. (Afifah et al., 2026; Fox & R., 2023; Hammood & A, 2024; Hikmah & Purnamawati, 2026b; Nazar et al., 2026; Sadek & R, 2023)

B. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to investigate the construction of ontological instability in Ḥasan Blāsīm's short story "*al-Ḥafrah*". The corpus consists of "*al-Ḥafrah*", one of the twenty-five short stories included in the anthology *Ma'raḍ al-Juṣaṣ*, published by Al-Mutawassit Books (Italy), where the story appears on pages 131–138. The analysis began with repeated close readings of the text to establish its central narrative concern, namely the reconstruction of reality and the instability of fictional worlds within the context of war. Based on this preliminary understanding, the unit of analysis was defined as words, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogues that narratively represent the construction, transformation, or interaction of realities within the story. Using these criteria, seven textual excerpts were identified and selected because they explicitly depict forms of ontological instability and therefore constitute the primary data of the study. The selected data were subsequently coded into four analytical categories adapted from McHale's postmodern fiction theory, namely spatial juxtaposition, interpolation, misattribution, and recursive embedding as the narrative strategies relevant to the construction of multiple worlds.

This qualitative, text-centered procedure is compatible with recent studies in the target journals that employ descriptive qualitative analysis, textual quotation, and systematic categorization for literary interpretation (Az-Zahra & Syafe'i, 2025; Jannah et al., 2025; Putri & Z., 2024; Rahmatika & Syafe'i, 2025). Each coded excerpt was then interpreted through five analytical dimensions: (1) its representation within the fictional world, (2) the external historical and socio-cultural context informing the narrative, (3) its conceptualization based on McHale's theory, (4) close textual interpretation, and (5) an evaluation of whether the fictional reality portrayed could plausibly exist within empirical reality. The integration of these five analytical dimensions was applied consistently across all seven data excerpts to ensure transparency, analytical coherence, and the reproducibility of the interpretive process. Therefore, the method of data presentation employed in this study combines formal and informal approaches. In other words, the data are initially

presented qualitatively and objectively in tabular form at the beginning of the results and discussion section, and subsequently presented informally without tables for analytical purposes. The integration of these two methods aims to provide a concise overview at the outset while simultaneously serving as a bridge toward a more comprehensive analysis. (Azhari, 2026; Syarifuddin et al., 2026)

C. Result and Discussion.

1. Results

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

Name	Subcategory	Significance	Data Pattern
World Pluralism (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 131,136)	-	A plurality of universes or heterocosms that are interconnected with one another	The story goes in a straight timeline as if the hole as a foreign space collects many worlds in the whole story diachronically,
Construction and Deconstruction of the World Simultaneously	Juxtaposition (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 133,137)	Positioning spaces that are not actually adjacent in reality as though they existed side by side	interposes many not adjacent places and times adjacently, and
	Interpolation (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 133)	Insertion of a foreign space between two spaces, that already recognized within reality	bridges between a world beneath another world
	Misattribution (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 133)	Removal of attributes inherently associated with a particular space and their arbitrary	

Name	Subcategory	Significance	Data Pattern
		replacement with alternative attributes	
Recursive Structure (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 138)	-	Existence of a world beneath another world within the narrative	

2. Discussion

a. World Pluralism

World pluralism constitutes one of the narrative methods of postmodernism in revealing the workings and conditions of the world. This method does not perceive a singular world through the multiplicity of worldviews; rather, it conceives of a plurality of universes, or heterocosms, that are interconnected with one another (Mchale & B, 1987, p. 27). McHale refers to this plurality of interconnected universes within a single narrative framework as "the zone." The zone is represented through the narrative of the protagonist's encounters with multiple realities within a hole. This narrative is illustrated in the following excerpt. (James & K, 2024; Qiu & B, 2024; Rinaldi et al., 2026)

وما إن بلغت نهاية الحديقة من جهة بناية متحف التاريخ الطبيعي سقطت في حفرة هناك....

- إسمع ... لا تخف!

أفرعني صوته المبحوح.

- من أنت؟

سألته والخوف يشلني.

. هل شعرت بألم؟

لا...

أمر إعتيادي. انها السلسلة

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

"Listen, don't be afraid!" His hoarse voice startled me.

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

"Are you in pain?"

"No."

"That is only natural. It is the chain." (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 131)

The selected excerpt narrates the protagonist's first encounter with the inhabitant of the hole after he falls into it while escaping from three armed masked men. At the

level of the fictional world, the text presents this event as a transition from one narrative space to another: from a world characterized by pursuit, violence, and uncertainty into an enclosed underground space inhabited by an elderly figure who later identifies himself as a Jinn. The story explicitly establishes these two spaces as possessing different existential conditions. Whereas the protagonist's world is portrayed as unstable and life-threatening, the world inside the hole is depicted as isolated, static, and detached from the violence occurring above ground. This contrast constitutes the primary textual evidence examined in the present analysis. (Fox & R., 2023; Sadek & R, 2023)

Although the story does not explicitly identify the conflict outside the hole with a particular historical event, the narrative setting resonates with the socio-historical circumstances of post-2003 Iraq, during which sectarian violence, armed conflict, and forced displacement became dominant features of everyday life (Haddad & Fanar, 2011; Hagan et al., 2015; Pirnie et al., 2008). Rather than treating the protagonist as a direct representation of a historical individual, this study employs the historical context as an interpretive framework that illuminates the conditions informing the fictional narrative. From the perspective of McHale's postmodern fiction theory, the protagonist's movement from the conflict-ridden surface world into the underground realm does not merely signify a change of location but a transition between two ontologically distinct worlds. The coexistence of these worlds within a single narrative space exemplifies the strategy of spatial juxtaposition, through which incompatible realities are brought into contact without being fully reconciled. Consequently, the encounter between the protagonist and the inhabitant of the hole functions as a narrative mechanism that destabilizes the boundaries separating different realities, thereby producing ontological instability. From an empirical perspective, the existence of a centuries-old jinn inhabiting an underground world cannot be verified within observable reality. Nevertheless, its function in the narrative is not to imitate empirical reality but to reconstruct reality through the interaction of incompatible ontological domains, allowing the experience of war and displacement to be articulated beyond the conventions of realist representation. (Fox & R., 2023; Hammood & A, 2024)

In addition to the encounter between the protagonist's world and the world of the elderly inhabitant of the hole, another encounter occurs between the world of

the hole and the world of a Russian soldier. This encounter is represented through the story narrated by the inhabitant of the hole in the following excerpt.

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

"I told him that I knew every secret of his life. To deepen his terror, I told him that I even knew about Nikolai, the youngest son of his aunt. He trembled the moment he heard the name. I spoke of how he and Nikolai had violated a village girl. His nerves collapsed. He fired the bullet into my head. All of this was nothing more than a trivial chain woven from the stories of us humans." (Bläsım & H, 2015, p. 136)

The selected excerpt narrates the encounter between the inhabitant of the hole and a Russian soldier who falls into the same underground space during the Winter War between Russia and Finland. Within the fictional world, the narrative introduces another character originating from a different historical conflict and geographical setting, thereby expanding the scope of the story beyond the protagonist's experience in Iraq. Unlike the protagonist, whose arrival in the hole is motivated by his attempt to escape armed violence, the Russian soldier enters the same space from the battlefield of the Winter War. Nevertheless, both characters converge within a single underground world inhabited by the elderly jinn. The text therefore establishes the hole as a narrative space that connects characters originating from distinct historical moments and spatial contexts while suspending the ordinary temporal and geographical boundaries that separate them. (Chakraoui & R, 2024; Hammood & A, 2024)

From the perspective of external historical context, the Winter War (1939–1940) formed part of the wider military conflicts surrounding the Second World War, whereas the protagonist's experience reflects the conditions of contemporary Iraq marked by prolonged violence and instability. These historical references function not as direct representations of specific events but as contextual frameworks that illuminate the plurality of conflicts evoked by the narrative. Likewise, although Bläsım later migrated to Finland after leaving Iraq (Löytty & O, 2017), this biographical fact is not treated as the source of textual meaning. Rather, it provides a broader literary context for understanding the recurring transnational settings that appear in his fiction. Interpreted through McHale's postmodern fiction theory, the

encounter between the Russian soldier and the inhabitant of the hole extends the process of ontological reconstruction by juxtaposing fictional worlds that originate from different historical realities. Moreover, the differing outcomes experienced by the Russian soldier and the protagonist illustrate what McHale terms forking paths, whereby multiple narrative possibilities emerge from comparable ontological conditions. Although both characters enter the same liminal world of the hole, the Russian soldier dies after being overwhelmed by fear, whereas the protagonist survives through the old man's assistance. This divergence demonstrates that the coexistence of multiple worlds does not produce a single narrative trajectory but generates alternative ontological possibilities within the same fictional universe. This reading is also consistent with recent studies that examine how literary texts represent social reality and conflict through differentiated narrative perspectives (Hasri et al., 2025; Ina et al., 2025). From an empirical perspective, such encounters between individuals separated by different historical periods cannot occur within observable reality. However, their coexistence within the fictional world functions as a postmodern narrative strategy that reconstructs reality through ontological plurality rather than empirical probability.

When compared, a distinction emerges between the encounter involving the world of conflict in Russia and Finland with the world of the hole and the encounter involving the world of conflict in Iraq and the world of the hole. This distinction is referred to by McHale as "forking paths," namely the simultaneous manifestation of divergent futures within a narrative (Mchale & B, 1987). This manifestation is represented through the contradictory behavior of the inhabitant of the hole in his encounters with the protagonist and with the Russian soldier. In his encounter with the Russian soldier, the inhabitant of the hole threatens him, ultimately causing the soldier to die of fear. Conversely, in his encounter with the protagonist, the inhabitant of the hole is portrayed as being concerned about the protagonist's condition. This contrast is striking, considering that both the Russian soldier and the protagonist originate from the same world, namely the world of conflict. Ultimately, the world pluralism formed by the world of the hole and the world of conflict generates different futures for the two characters: the protagonist survives, whereas the Russian soldier dies.

b. Construction and Deconstruction of the World Simultaneously

The simultaneous construction and deconstruction of worlds occurs within the realm of heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopia as a third space situated beyond utopia, the space of expectation, and dystopia, the space of disorder, containing contradictory elements that enable it to exist despite its apparent irrationality (Foucault et al., 1986, pp. 22–27). In other words, in constructing and simultaneously deconstructing the heterotopic world, McHale grounds his framework in the spatial concepts derived from Foucault's thought. Based on this foundation, McHale proposes several strategies for the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of space: juxtaposition, namely the placement of spaces that are not contiguous in reality as though they were adjacent; interpolation, or the insertion of foreign spaces into the midst of spaces already recognized within the real world; and misattribution, which severs the relationship between a space and the attributes inherently attached to it before replacing them with alternative attributes (Cahaya, 2026; Mchale & B, 1987, p. 46; Nazar et al., 2026)

1) Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition constitutes the first strategy within postmodern narrative. This strategy is carried out by positioning spaces that are not actually adjacent in reality as though they existed side by side. Such juxtaposition is illustrated in the following excerpt. (Qiu & B, 2024; Rybalkin & S, 2024)

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

"That's right. He was a Russian soldier."
He, the Old Man, read my thoughts and gave a faint, hollow grin.
"Then what was he doing in our country? Working at the embassy?"
"He fell into the forest during the Winter War between Russia and Finland."
"You really are insane!" (Blasim & H, 2015, p. 133)

The selected excerpt illustrates the coexistence of spatially distinct worlds within a single fictional location. Such a configuration can be understood alongside recent scholarship emphasizing that literary representation actively constructs relations

among place, identity, and social reality rather than merely reproducing them (Chusna & N., 2025; Syarifuddin et al., 2026). At the level of the fictional world, both the protagonist and the elderly jinn are associated with Iraq, whereas the Russian soldier enters the same hole from the battlefield of the Winter War between Russia and Finland. Despite their different geographical and historical origins, the narrative presents all three characters as occupying the same underground space without providing any realist mechanism that connects these locations. The juxtaposition therefore functions as an intrinsic feature of the fictional world rather than as a geographical displacement that requires empirical explanation. (Chakraoui & R, 2024; Rinaldi et al., 2026)

Interpreted within its broader historical context, the narrative brings together conflicts originating from different regions and historical periods, thereby expanding the scope of violence beyond a single national or temporal setting. However, these references are not intended to establish a factual geographical continuity between Iraq and Northern Europe. Instead, they serve as narrative resources through which the story reconfigures spatial relations. From the perspective of McHale's postmodern fiction theory, this configuration exemplifies spatial juxtaposition, in which mutually incompatible spaces are positioned within the same ontological domain without resolving the contradiction between them. The narrative thus suspends ordinary assumptions about geographical continuity and replaces them with a fictional spatial logic governed by ontological plurality. Close textual analysis suggests that the hole functions as a liminal space where disparate worlds become contiguous, enabling interactions that would otherwise be impossible under realist spatial conventions. From an empirical perspective, such a convergence of geographically and historically separated spaces cannot occur within observable reality. Nevertheless, within the postmodern logic of the story, this anti-realist spatial construction becomes the narrative mechanism through which ontological instability is produced and sustained.

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

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

Before leaving the hole, the Old Man told me that he had come from Baghdad and had lived during the era of the Abbasid Caliphate. He had been a teacher, a writer, and an inventor. He once proposed to the caliph that the city's alleys be lit with lanterns. Before that, he had overseen the lighting of the mosques. The thieves of Baghdad were disturbed by his lanterns and pursued him after the dawn prayer. At the time, he was deeply occupied with expanding his plans to illuminate houses by modern means. Not far from his home, the keeper of lanterns stumbled over his robes and fell into the hole. (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 137)

The excerpt demonstrates narrative juxtaposition in terms of time. The use of historical layers is significant because recent studies of Arabic literature similarly emphasize the relationship between literary form, historical change, and changing social imaginaries (Finanti & A, 2024; Saputra et al., 2025). Within the narrative, the elderly inhabitant of the hole is said to originate from the Abbasid Caliphate era. This period came to an end in the thirteenth century. In contrast, the protagonist of the story originates from the era of conflict and terrorism in Iraq, a period that began following the topple of Saddam Hussein in the early twenty-first century. In reality, these two eras are separated by approximately seven centuries. This condition indicates the juxtaposition of two anti-realist temporalities, since the two periods should not logically coexist side by side. Furthermore, the separation within the narrative is connected through an interpolation. (Francisco et al., 2025; Yaseen & M, 2024)

2) Interpolation

Interpolation constitutes the second strategy in the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of narrative space. Interpolation refers to the insertion of a foreign space between two spaces already recognized within reality (Mchale & B, 1987, p. 46). This interpolation is clearly represented in the following excerpt. (Qiu & B, 2024; Rybalkin & S, 2024)

صحيح هو جندي روسي.
قرأ أفكارى وعلى وجهه ابتسامة متكلفة.
وما كان يفعل في بلدنا عمل في السفارة؟

سقط في الغابة أثناء الحرب الشتوية بين روسيا وفنلندا .

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

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

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

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

"You really are insane!" (Bläsim & H, 2015, p. 133)

The dialogue demonstrates the presence of narrative interpolation that inserts a foreign space between two spaces known to exist in reality. The foreign space in question is the hole. This hole is situated between two spaces that concretely exist, namely Iraq and the forest located between Russia and Finland. These two locations are separated by approximately three thousand two hundred kilometers. Nevertheless, the relatively shallow hole into which the old man from the Abbasid Caliphate era, the protagonist, and the Russian soldier all fall functions as a connecting medium between the two locations. This condition demonstrates the operation of interpolation, namely the strategy of inserting the hole as a foreign space between Iraq and the Russia–Finland forest, both of which are recognized as real spaces. The resulting narrative linkage resembles the broader tendency of contemporary Arabic literary texts to bring distinct social and geopolitical realities into a shared representational field (Mulyadi et al., 2025; Siregar et al., 2024). In addition to the insertion of a foreign space, the narrative also involves the removal of attributes inherently attached to a particular space through the strategy of misattribution. (Qiu & B, 2024; Yaseen & M, 2024)

3) Misattribution

Misattribution constitutes the final strategy in the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of space within postmodern fiction. Misattribution refers to the removal of attributes inherently associated with a particular space and their arbitrary replacement with alternative attributes (Mchale & B, 1987, p. 46). This strategy is illustrated in the following excerpt. (Hikmah & Purnamawati, 2026a; Rybalkin & S, 2024)

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

I began to study the hole. It resembled a well, its walls slick with damp clay, yet from the pores of the earth there drifted a fragrance soft and sweet, almost like the scent of flowers. (Blasim & H, 2015, p. 133)

The selected excerpt demonstrates how the narrative constructs the hole through the strategy of misattribution, whereby attributes conventionally associated with one object or spatial domain are reassigned to another. Within the fictional world, the hole is not described merely as an underground cavity but as a space distinguished by an unexpected floral fragrance and by its capacity to connect characters originating from different places and historical periods. These textual features differentiate the hole from an ordinary physical location and establish it as a liminal narrative space whose characteristics exceed realist expectations. Rather than functioning as a realistic setting, the hole is presented as a space whose properties are continually redefined by the logic of the narrative itself. (Azhari, 2026; Rybalkin & S, 2024)

Viewed from the perspective of external context, the story juxtaposes references to the Abbasid period, the Winter War, and post-2003 Iraq without attempting to reconstruct a historically continuous chronology. Instead, these historical references become narrative materials through which different temporal worlds are brought into contact. According to McHale's postmodern fiction theory, such reassignment of spatial and temporal attributes exemplifies misattribution, since characteristics that ordinarily belong to separate ontological domains are relocated into a single fictional space. Close textual interpretation indicates that the floral fragrance is significant not because it contradicts an empirically verifiable property of underground spaces, but because it marks the hole as a space governed by an alternative ontological order. Likewise, the coexistence of multiple historical eras within the same location is not presented as a historical claim but as a narrative strategy that reconfigures spatial and temporal relations. From an empirical perspective, neither the simultaneous convergence of different historical periods nor the relocation of incompatible spatial attributes can occur within observable reality. Within the fictional world, however, these anti-realist configurations function as mechanisms through which ontological instability is constructed and sustained.

In summary, these three strategies function simultaneously to construct and deconstruct space within the narrative. Juxtaposition constructs and deconstructs spaces by placing together spaces that should not logically coexist side by side. Examples include the juxtaposition of Iraq with the forest between Russia and Finland, as well as the juxtaposition of temporalities between the Abbasid Caliphate era, World War II, and the post-Saddam conflict era. Subsequently, interpolation introduces a single inhabitable hole as a foreign space situated between Iraq and the forest between Russia and Finland, despite the substantial geographical distance separating them. Finally, misattribution detaches the hole from attributes conventionally associated with soil or unpleasant odors and replaces them with the attribute of fragrance. In addition, misattribution also removes the hole from the attribute of immobility and replaces it with the capacity to shift from Iraq to the forest between Russia and Finland, thereby enabling it to connect three individuals originating from three different historical eras.

c. Recursive Structure

Recursive structure constitutes the postmodern fiction concept that most prominently foregrounds the ontological dimension. The emphasis on repeated narrative configuration also parallels recent studies of narrative structure that show how sequencing and repetition organize meaning in literary and audiovisual texts (Ina et al., 2025; Putri & Z., 2024). This structure is realized through the application of the hypodiegetic concept. The concept itself refers to the existence of a world beneath another world within the narrative (Higgins & D, 1978). Within the hypodiegetic world, reality undergoes repetition through the emergence of new objects derived from older objects, thereby disrupting the direction of the narrative (Mchale & B, 1987, pp. 112–113). McHale argues that such a structure gives rise to what he terms a “strange loop,” a condition in which the narrative becomes enclosed within an endless cycle. It is this loop that ultimately foregrounds the ontological dimension of the postmodern fictional world, since within such a narrative enclosure, the ontology of the world may shift without altering the narrative itself. This structure is illustrated through the following dialogue. (James & K, 2024; Masood et al., 2025)

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

"Who are you?!" she asked between gasping breaths. Wounds marred her beautiful face.

"I am a jinn... What happened to you?" My voice sounded as though it had returned from ancient ages.

She answered, "A blood-analysis robot was chasing me."

She sucked on her swollen finger, bloated like a mushroom.

"It's nothing unusual." (Blāsim & H, 2015, p. 138)

The selected excerpt depicts the arrival of a young woman who falls into the same hole previously occupied by the protagonist. The recurrence of a comparable narrative situation is important because contemporary literary analysis increasingly treats repetition and structural patterning as meaningful mechanisms of representation rather than merely as plot devices (Ina et al., 2025; Putri & Z., 2024). At the level of the fictional world, the sequence closely mirrors the narrative presented at the beginning of the story. Similar to the protagonist, the young woman unexpectedly enters the underground space, encounters its inhabitant, experiences fear, and is confronted with the presence of a corpse. Although the participants differ, the narrative sequence itself is reproduced with striking structural similarity. This repetition constitutes the primary textual phenomenon examined in the present analysis.

From the perspective of narrative theory, this repeated configuration should first be understood as a recursive narrative pattern rather than immediately as evidence of a hypodiegetic world. Following Genette's narratological distinction, a hypodiegetic level refers to a narrative embedded within another narrative (Genette & G, 1980). In "*al-Hafrah*", however, the concluding episode does not introduce an independently narrated embedded story. Instead, it reproduces the narrative configuration established earlier within the same fictional world. Consequently, the analytical emphasis lies not on the existence of a new diegetic level but on the recursive reappearance of an already established narrative structure. Interpreted within McHale's postmodern framework, this recursive pattern illustrates the instability of ontological boundaries, since the narrative repeatedly regenerates equivalent situations while assigning them to different characters. The protagonist

successively occupies two ontological positions: first as the newcomer entering the hole and later as its long-term inhabitant after the old man's death. This transformation destabilizes the distinction between beginning and ending, origin and continuation, thereby producing an ontological structure in which narrative positions become continually exchangeable. (Mabrouk & B, 2024; Rinaldi et al., 2026)

McHale relates this recursive organization to what Hofstadter conceptualizes as a strange loop, namely a structure in which repeated movement through different levels ultimately returns to an analogous point without restoring the original state. Within the fictional world of "*al-Hafrah*", the arrival of the young woman does not merely repeat the protagonist's experience but simultaneously reconstructs it under altered ontological conditions: the protagonist now occupies the position formerly held by the old jinn. Close textual interpretation therefore indicates that the narrative does not simply cycle back to its beginning but generates a renewed fictional world in which identities, roles, and realities are recursively reorganized. From an empirical perspective, such endless recursive transformation cannot be verified within observable reality. Nevertheless, within the postmodern logic of the story, the strange loop functions as a narrative mechanism through which ontological instability is continuously reproduced, ensuring that the fictional world remains permanently open to further recursive reconstruction.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Hasan Blasim's "*al-Hafrah*" constructs its narrative through ontological instability, thereby confirming the shift from the epistemological dominant to the ontological dominant proposed in McHale's theory of postmodern fiction. In response to the first research question, the study shows that the narrative is configured through the interaction of multiple fictional worlds that continuously destabilize conventional boundaries of space, time, identity, and reality. In response to the second research question, the analysis reveals that this ontological instability is produced through a set of postmodern narrative strategies, namely spatial juxtaposition, interpolation, misattribution, and recursive structure, all of which reconstruct reality beyond the conventions of realist representation. Rather than merely depicting war and displacement, these strategies transform conflict into an ontological condition in which multiple realities

coexist, overlap, and continually generate new fictional possibilities.

The findings contribute theoretically by demonstrating the applicability of McHale's postmodern fiction theory to contemporary Iraqi war literature and by extending discussions of Ḥasan Blāsim's fiction beyond dominant approaches that primarily emphasize trauma, violence, exile, and refugee experience. Instead, this study argues that the narrative significance of "*al-Ḥafrah*" lies in the reconstruction of reality through ontological instability, thereby highlighting the importance of narrative mechanisms in understanding postmodern representations of war. The study therefore also aligns with recent Arabic literary research that foregrounds representation, social criticism, conflict, identity, and narrative form as mutually connected dimensions of literary meaning. At the same time, this study is limited to a close textual analysis of a single short story and therefore does not claim that the identified narrative strategies characterize Blāsim's entire oeuvre or contemporary Iraqi fiction more broadly. Future studies may examine other works by Blāsim or compare them with postmodern war narratives from different cultural contexts to investigate whether similar forms of ontological instability emerge across contemporary conflict literature. Such comparative inquiries would further clarify the contribution of postmodern narratology to the study of war, migration, exile, and the literary reconstruction of reality.

The scope of this study is necessarily limited by its focus on a single short story and by its exclusive use of McHale's postmodern fiction theory as the principal analytical framework. Consequently, the findings should be understood as an interpretation of the narrative construction of "*al-Ḥafrah*" rather than as a general characterization of Ḥasan Blāsim's fiction or contemporary Iraqi war literature as a whole. While this focused approach enables a detailed examination of ontological instability within the selected text, it also leaves open the possibility that other theoretical perspectives or broader corpora may reveal different dimensions of Blāsim's narrative practice. Future research may therefore extend the present study by undertaking comparative analyses of multiple works by Blāsim, examining postmodern war narratives from other cultural and linguistic traditions, or integrating alternative narratological approaches alongside McHale's framework. Cross-linguistic readings of Arabic texts and their translations may also provide further insight into how ontological instability is constructed, negotiated, or transformed across different linguistic and cultural contexts. Such directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of postmodern narratology in relation to war, migration, exile, and the

literary reconstruction of reality.

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