

## Victim and Victimizer: Silenced Narratives in Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai's *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* (2013) (Ala Satehuna Ta'er Gherib)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Iraqi war narrative depicts the devastation caused by war and three decades of persecution. Writing about the Iraqis' traumatic experience is a critical step toward allowing their wounds to speak for themselves and determining the root cause of social and cultural illnesses. This paper analyzes Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai's *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* (2013) as a theatrical performance that studies the relationship between the victim and the victimizer. The methodological framework of this paper draws on the theory of war trauma and the concept of real places and unreal spaces to clarify the relationship between the victim and the victimizer, show how they might exchange places, and

demonstrate how space might be used as a signifier of trauma. The study highlights that victimization and offending behaviour are intimately linked, that victim and offender populations overlap, and that the same individual – whether the Iraqis or the American Troops - can play multiple roles sequentially or even simultaneously. Through trauma narratives, the analysis displays spaces that exhibit dual meanings that contrast with real places - spaces actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract simultaneously.

**Keywords:** Silenced Narratives, Victim, Victimizer, Trauma, Space

## Victim and Victimizer: Silenced Narratives in Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai's *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* (2013) (Ala Satehuna Ta'er Gherib)

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War is a central theme in modern drama and is employed to highlight the suffering of both the victims and victimizers, civilians as well as military. The Iraqi war narrative portrays the devastating effect that the constant presence of war and three decades of oppression have had on Iraqis' perspectives on life. Writing about their painful experience is an important part of letting their wounds speak for themselves. Meanwhile, within the dynamics of violence, there is a complicated interaction between the many and complimentary roles that victimizers and victims play.

This paper analyses Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai's *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* (2013) as a theatrical performance that studies the relationship between the victim and the victimizer. The study emphasizes the point that victimization and offending behaviour are inextricably linked, that victim and offender populations overlap, and that the same individual can play different roles sequentially or even simultaneously. The play clearly depicts the trauma of victimization and the consequences of the invasion and occupation of Iraq on both ordinary Iraqis and the American military. Through trauma narratives, the study shows dual-meaning spaces that act as a microcosm of different environments, and other unreal spaces that contrast with real places - spaces actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract at the same time.

The methodological framework of this paper draws on the theory of war trauma and the concept of real places and unreal spaces to clarify the relationship between the victim and the victimizer, show how they might exchange places, and demonstrate how space might be used as a

signifier of trauma. The agonizing experience of war and violence creates traumatizing consequences can be seen later. Analyzing traumatic narratives can be extremely useful in determining the root cause of social and cultural illnesses that may not be directly linked to any single event. It helps identify true victims and victimizers.

The trauma of victimization is a direct reaction to the aftermath of crime. Victims of crime experience significant physical and psychological trauma. According to Victoria Anne Hahl, victimization can be classified into different categories: for example, physical victimization is criminally seen in those who suffer from rape, brutality, theft, and murder; emotional victimization is another category that is seen in those who are under psychological suffering or injustice, which is found in those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), especially after wars or shocking experiences. (6)

The effects of victimization vary throughout life for both victims and victimizers. A person who experiences the negative effects of an armed conflict between two or more parties, such as death, injury, hardship, loss of property, or displacement, is said to be a victim of war. There are many different types of victims and victimizers in war, as well as victims who become victimizers and vice versa. Soldiers and citizens alike are impacted by war. Each person has a unique tale. Both experience suffering and violent events on a daily basis. These types of suffering might be psychological, physical, or emotional.

Iraqis are not the only victims of war, but so are American forces stationed in Iraq under the guise of protecting Iraqis. In their article, *The Soldier as Victim: Peering through the Looking Glass* Ross McGarry

and Sandra Walklate argue that the relative invisibility of the male soldier as victim in criminology and victimology, along with the rising visibility of the male soldier as criminal, “reveals much about the limitations inherent in both disciplines and their respective capacity for appreciating the ‘invisible’ harms done as a result of war” (901).

Andrew Karmen states, “Crime victims are harmed by illegal acts”, but adds, “People can become victims of accidents, natural disasters, diseases, or social problems like warfare” (1). David Kauzlarich et al., for instance, have proposed that “civilians and soldiers in conflict” can be regarded as “victims of state crime” (175), with Vincenzo Ruggiero adding that “soldiers, while doing their unpleasant, ennobling duty, are being victimized by State and corporate actors” (251). Likewise, from military history Richard Holmes maintains a reasoning of what he calls the “essential paradox of soldiering” according to which the soldier finds himself “being both victim and executioner”. Thus, soldiers who act on behalf of the state, Ross McGarry & Sandra Walklate emphasize, “can be viewed as victims or offenders in the context of the presumed ‘exceptional’ circumstances of war” (903). Due to the trauma of war, soldiers are often left with both mental and physical wounds.

Long years of warfare, oppression, prohibition, and a raging civil war have had a significant impact on defining and influencing the subject of Iraqi literature, as well as its formal and artistic techniques. Literary representations of life under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein as well as the U.S. occupation of Iraq are narratives of the exceptional state, such as wars and dictatorial regimes where individuals, unless the sovereign allows, “do not even have the status of persons” (Agamben 3). Writing trauma and depictions of violence, terror, and individual suffering have been prevalent. The inclination to display and

expose violence, to “open the wound” and leave it open, is a common trope in post-2003 war narratives.

Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri, Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi, Rasha Fadhil, Awatif Naeem, and Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai are just a few of the most recent generations of those playwrights whose plays have witnessed the ongoing suffering of Iraqi people because of war and the social media which agitated it. Their works singly and together show the power of theatre to provide a voice of humanity and hope even in the ongoing tragic circumstances of this long-suffering country.

The Iraqi dramatist Abdul Razak Al-Rubai is one of several contemporary Iraqi authors who have been pleading to be heard to recount the country's turbulent history. He wrote *A Strange Bird on our Roof* during the periods of the American occupation from 2003 to 2011, and the chaos that resulted from the occupation and withdrawal of the American forces in the years after 2011. It addresses the physical and psychological trauma of wars and prolonged years of oppression in Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation. The play is preoccupied with the relationship between the victim and the victimizer and how they might exchange places. The question of who is to blame for the suffering of the Iraqi people is one that receives a lot of attention in the play: is it the US government and military, jihadists, Iraqi politicians, or the Iraqi people themselves?

The consequences of trauma are emphasized by investigating the relationship between those who affect and are being affected by war. The play tells the story of an American soldier who, stationed on the roof of the home of an Iraqi the army is seeking, establishes a fragile bond of common humanity with the mother of the house and falls in love with the daughter. The mother and the daughter discover that the American soldier is sympathetic to their plight. However, at the end, the dynamics

of the war and the occupation destroy all hope of such a humane outcome. Their recognition of a shared humanity can do little to halt the machinery of war.

Living far from home and in dangerous circumstances make the American soldier suffer in a similar way. He is one of the innocent people sacrificed for the sake of ambitious politicians who abuse their power by using ethical and civilized speeches to justify unethical and uncivilized actions. Unlike other dramatists who give very limited space for expressing individual experiences without involving collective issues, Al-Rubai discusses the tragedy of war and its effects on regular people, whether Iraqi or American. He attempts to provide a set of implications where the characters bear the burden of the war's catastrophes and disasters. Shedding light on the experiences of soldiers and other "real" victims of the Iraq War, such as Iraqi women, children, and other civilians whose traumas get marginalized or erased, Al-Rubai is an example of what Arthur Frank calls "the wounded storyteller," who can give words to the wounds of his homeland and who enjoys the distance required to be able to reflect on and to tell of chaos narrative. Frank argues that, "the teller of chaos stories is, predominantly, the wounded storyteller, but those who are truly living the chaos cannot tell in words. To turn the chaos into a verbal story is to have some reflective grasp of it. The chaos that can be told in story is already taking place at a distance and is being reflected on retrospectively" (98). The chaos narrative, according to Frank, is one that lacks "narrative order" and whose "plot imagines life never becoming better" (97), implying that there is no chance for progress. "The sense that no one is in control" (100) and the "over determination" of the victims' problems in the chaos narrative, "troubles go all the way down to bottomless depths. What can be told only begins to suggest all that is wrong" (99). The chaos narrative allows us to see and hear the narrative's silenced and oppressed characters.

Mark Ledbetter has some hope that "Narrative can reverse the course of rampant victimization in a world where each day more and more persons 'disappear' from the human story because they have no say in the directions their lives will take because they are another gender, race, religion and/or politic than those who have power in our society" (ix). Ledbetter is convinced that narrative has the power to liberate society's victims and alert those who victimize to how and why we violate the existences of those politically weaker than ourselves. Ledbetter continues, "An ethic of writing is to discover and to make heard silenced voices; an ethic of reading is to hear those voices. No text, no human story, is without victims" (1-2). Silenced or untold narratives include various voices that are out of our contexts of recognition. *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* portrays how the American military oppresses the Iraqis, who are then oppressed by their government, and how the American soldiers who are left alone in a foreign country with foreign people are constantly in danger of dying. American soldiers are left there supposedly to provide safety and to do their assigned duties, despite the fact that they themselves need to be protected. Narratives that have been kept silent include both those who affect and those who are affected.

The play was inspired by real events in telling the story of an unlikely relationship that develops between the occupier and the occupied. Rasha Fadhil, an Iraqi writer, was living in one of Tikrit's high conflict zones at the time when the insurgency against American forces was escalating. She told the playwright about a family who lived there one day. The Americans set up a surveillance point on their house's roof to ambush one of the sons who was involved in the insurgency and to put psychological pressure on the family. He imagined what would happen if an American soldier fell in love with an Iraqi woman in this situation, and he wondered if

we were all both victims and victimizers. The play attempts to answer that question.

In his introduction to the play, Al Rubai writes:

As I wrote this play, I was preoccupied with a question about the relationship between victim and victimizer: is it possible to build a bridge between the two based upon shared humanity? Both are feeling, thinking human beings, even though they might find themselves coping with different circumstances and encounter each other within a hostile environment. Is it possible for a human connection to develop despite these obstacles? (121)

*A Strange Bird on Our Roof* portrays the soldier as a victim rather than an executioner. Not only does he kill and wound Others, but he also runs the risk of being killed and wounded himself. Therefore, Al-Rubai's soldier, "falls outside the normative imagery of theory and practice with regards to victimization. With this victimological 'otherness' in mind, essential paradox of soldiering begins to carry some weight: in this environment the soldier can be 'both victim and executioner'" (McGarry and Walklate 909). There is a reason for even pulling the trigger in the play. The soldier is struggling to survive. At the back of his mind, he knows that he is trying to preserve people's lives. On the other hand, life has never granted peace to the Iraqi people. The analysis of the play suggests that the constant presence of wars, as well as years of dictatorship and oppression, traumatized the play's characters and significantly shaped their lives, identities, and relationship to the place.

Although the characters in this play are fictional, they are from everyday life: the mother, 70s; Rasha, her daughter; an English teacher, 30; Um Haider, their neighbor; an American Soldier, an American Sergeant, additional American

Soldiers, three young, male, Iraqi insurgents, and a Newscaster. The play depicts the lives of two Iraqi women—a mother and her daughter who are left alone in their home after all the family's male members have either died or departed. The women's feelings of bitterness are shared by all Iraqi people who lived under the war. The story of Rasha and her mother is a direct and explicit symbol of the oppressed people, and the mother's house can be considered a symbol of the contested land or homeland. The characters in this play carry indications that express the people's suffering, in light of the low security and standard of living, while the conflict over oil continues without a resolution. The mother is the symbol of a nation weary of war. She previously lost two sons in the first and second Gulf Wars, and the prospect of losing a third son now exists.

Female characters in this play have not only witnessed decades of dictatorship and wars, but also an inevitable form of death – be it the symbolic death of their dreams and ideals or the physical death of their families, friends, and relatives. All women are suffering from unbearable agony as a result of such traumatizing incidents, which makes it impossible for them to comprehend, speak to, or forgive the Other. The war experience casts people into specific gender roles, forcing them to conform to certain roles and expectations. According to Joshua Goldstein, killing in war does not come naturally for either gender, and gender norms "frequently mould men, women, and children to the needs of the war system" (15). Like no other experience, war shapes gender identities and gender expectations.

During war, space serves as a trauma signifier. Buildings are destroyed in war, along with the memories they represent and their material and non-material significance, affecting people's perceptions of their places in the world. Cities are altered, erased, and/or reshaped. Individuals must negotiate their sense of

identity and the meaning of their experiences through their relationship to space. For soldiers, space is usually an Other, an abstraction of war and the enemy; for noncombatants, traumatized space, so to speak, indicates the erasure of identity. Thus, added to the physical and social body, space is a location of political and discursive conflict in war. Baudrillard, Foucault, Jameson, and other postmodernist critics regard space as a political medium capable of both disciplining and empowering individuals (Nadesan). Foucault describes space as a discursive medium through which institutional power is enacted and contested (23). Through this lens, space could be seen in the play as a political medium, a discursive zone of political strife in which institutional power is realized and materialized.

In *A Strange Bird on Our Roof*, narrative takes place in discursive space and time. Such discursive spaces overlap, compete, and influence one another to create new discursive spaces. Space becomes symbolic as it points to other levels of meaning in the text, and the setting encourages the expression of both ethical and moral questions. The play starts from a material position, the home, to enable the audience to comprehend how trauma and politics are engraved, frequently in subtle ways, in the spaces and, as a result, are capable of affecting a material and a psychological influence.

The first scene begins with a description of the house, which occupies the entire stage and serves as the play's setting: "The stage is divided into lower and upper parts. The lower part occupies two-thirds of the stage, while the remaining third is occupied by the upper part, which represents a roof with a birdcage" (122). This technique of cross-cutting in dividing the stage is crucial for understanding the play's concepts and clarifying the relationships between the characters. An American soldier is stationed in the upper

part, while the Iraqi family, represented by a mother and her daughter, lives in the lower part. Because the family is under surveillance, it is necessary to divide the set into multiple spaces. The American soldier's position on the roof is a representation of the physical, emotional, and spatial constraints that the Iraqi family is under. In striving to shield the family from perceived threats from the outside world, the American military paradoxically exposes them to the more subtle mechanics of political violence, particularly the invasive politics of surveillance and homeland security at the national and institutional levels. The soldier's position on the roof also puts him in the higher position and gives him the upper hand over the Iraqi family. Space thus acts as relationship signifier, clarifying power relations from the very beginning.

The house defines the story. Al-Rubai develops a spatial dynamic that helps to investigate both the content of this environment and the ways it projects itself onto narrative by producing a space that "designates, mirrors, and reflects" (Foucault 24) the values of political environment. The roof stands for the occupier and the house represents the occupied country. Violence will always permeate the lines that divide the house from the chaotic, ideologically unstable public sphere. Despite efforts to create domestic spaces that are safe, stable, and secure, violence remains an essential component of private lives.

The first scene shows how space serves as a signifier of trauma. Angry at the disorderly home, the mother says, "Look how they rummaged through our things, which we've kept tidy for all these years" (125). Rasha asks bitterly, "We will straighten things out, but who will sort through the memories scrambled in our heads? Who will mend our hearts, torn where their blades have entered" (125)? Though the concept of trauma originally refers to a "bodily wound" in ancient

Greek, in recent cultural studies it refers to the psychoanalytic concept signifying a wound inflicted on the mind, not the body (Caruth 3).

Disgraced and humiliated, Rasha and her mother have to leave the country because nothing is left for them: “Ziyad ran away, and our house is violated. Nothing is left but to turn our back on our country...The world left us here, hanging between life and death, breathing fear and alienation with that jerboa” (129). Fear and panic are imposed on the mother and her daughter by the stranger who has occupied the roof of the house, even though he has justified his presence. Rasha exclaims, “It seems that war will never end, as long as the black gold flows below” (127). Rasha, who represents the Iraqi people, continues to complain, and criticize the government for seeking help from strangers: “That’s because we’re the losers. We don’t have anything to worry about. They’re the winners and they guard their booty, including us” (128).

Likewise, the American soldier is depicted as a war victim. He faces terrible conditions. With extremely high temperatures, American soldiers in Iraq went months without a thorough shower or properly clean clothes. Rasha states, “My friend Maysa told me that once they had a military squad over their rooftop, too, and the Humvee used to come twice, in the morning and in the evening, so that the soldiers could discharge their waste in bags and receive canned food” (127). The mother continues, “How can he stay through summer? How will we sleep on the roof while he pees in his plastic bag” (127)? The setting presents the Iraqi family and the American soldier as individuals who suffer differently on the same space.

The second scene presents another type of victims occupying a different space, “whose alternative to a literal disappearance from the human story is to commit desperate acts of violence to themselves, even to those whom they love,

in order to create a world that, while not of their choosing, is at least of their making. In this world, the victims are seen and heard” (Ledbetter 133). The scene presents three young, Iraqi, male insurgents, wearing masks watching, and deciding to explode coming cars whether they include civilians or the U.S. military:

FIRST. It’s just running late. Why worry? The bomb will explode sooner or later anyway.

THIRD. It might kill civilians.

FIRST. We win either way. The important thing is to keep the Americans from getting comfortable and turn the people against them.

SECOND. The Americans sit on the people’s chest while they suffer.

FIRST. Then the people are better off dead.

THIRD. Let them die, but not by our hand. I’m not a murderer.

FIRST. We aren’t murderers! We are mujahidin! (130)

Iraqis join insurgencies for a variety of reasons, including a desire to drive foreign forces out of Iraq. However, the play highlights the blurred line between the political and the criminal, where victims become victimizers.

The third scene is the longest scene in the play where the climax occurs, and new traumatic experiences are represented. Because of Rasha's experience as an English teacher and her knowledge of the language, Um-Haider, the neighbour, wants Rasha to accompany her so that she can serve as a liaison between the Iraqi people and the American soldiers. Um-Haider exclaims:

I don’t know what to say. The Red Crescent came here with aid, and once the people saw the food rations, they broke into the Red Crescent building. The police

couldn't control the chaos so they called the Americans and now we can't speak with them in English, so we need Rasha to... The situation is out of control. People will kill each other. There isn't any translator. Please. (131)

Rasha refuses to go: "I told you a thousand times: don't tell them I speak English. I don't want to mediate between killer and victim" (131). Rasha opposes the occupying forces, believing it impossible to communicate with them: "Our land has become fertile soil for the seeds of death... Our land suffocates under a jungle of death" (130). Nevertheless, she is forced to change her opinion when she is asked to translate the dialogue for the sake of the hungry people who rely on the Red Crescent's services, despite her mother's concerns:

They know that she's a teacher who does her job at the school only and comes back home in one piece. You know what it means to get close to the Americans. They're like the asphalt paver, with its scorching flames and poisonous stench. They don't smell nice, those cowards with guns. Their weapons stink of blood. (133- 4)

Yet, Rasha heeds the people's call and abandons her fight against the strange occupier.

The mother, alone, weeps and mourns her long-absent son, Ziad, and decides to walk up to the roof to check on his birds, which may be dying of "thirst, starvation, loss, and homesickness" (132). She moves with difficulty and, detecting the movement, the Soldier points his gun in the direction of the movement.

The mother is terrified. Upon seeing her frightened face, the soldier puts down his gun. Seeing the horror in her eyes, he tries to calm her down, but she is still afraid. He apologetically kisses her hands. He

sees her tears; he hugs her and cries. After long silence the mother asks the soldier: Do you want to kill me? Why? Was that what they taught you in the army, to draw a target around a mother's heart? Don't you have a mother? A mother who misses you. (To herself.) Why am I talking to him? I don't understand his language, he doesn't understand mine. (133)

Individual sorrows and agonies are crushed and silenced by the war's cultural trauma. The representation of women in the play, which follows the tradition of war literature in portraying women as symbols and metaphorical representations of national loss/trauma, is an apt illustration of the scene; "under patriarchy male narcissism defends itself by projecting its vulnerability onto woman" (Radstone 468).

The play undermines the masculinity of war and war literature by allowing the voice of the devastated women in the war to speak and be heard. The mother continues,

Open my heart with your gun and you will find it shot through and through, blasted by war. I lost a son in the first Gulf War. He was handsome like you. He came back wrapped in a flag, while the national anthem played . . . a medal pinned to his chest . . . (She laughs.) What good is a medal, or valor?! I listen for his laughter, that used to ring through the house, but there is only silence. Then I lost my second son in the second Gulf War. He was martyred during an American raid. His body was ripped apart by a bomb from your country. And Ziyad has left us... We have not heard from him since. Now you want to kill me. Kill me, my son. Kill me and earn a medal to give to your mother, who waits for you as I wait for Ziyad. You are young and



handsome. How your mother must miss you! (133)

According to Magda Romanska's article "Trauma and Testimony", the mother is "a textbook trauma victim" with her stillness, pride, and peacefulness (227); she survives all these disasters, particularly wars, while her dearest people die.

The play incorporates themes of death, despair, and deprivation, as told through the story of Rasha's brothers' martyrdom as a sacrifice for the homeland. Here, trauma is not registered in repressed feelings, omissions, or lacunas in the text (Pederson 338), but expressed through agonizing memories.

This moment in the play witnesses a turning point in the relationship between the mother and the soldier. At first, the mother has expressed her anger and discontent, calling the soldier a "desert rodent" (125), but only when she calms down, do her maternal instincts lead her to contemplate the suffering that the soldier's mother must be undergoing as she awaits her son's return. Despite their cultural and political differences, the mother and the soldier discover a shared humanity. Despite the language barrier, a bond built on empathy, compassion, and a deep understanding begins to develop. The woman who needs a son to make up for her lost sons, and the alienated soldier who longs to feel the affection of his mother, whom he misses, connect therapeutically through the idea that love is the common language of humanity.

Rasha's return, however, awakens the audience to the harsh reality of life in Iraq, where the people are famished and in need of humanitarian aid due to American domination over the nation and its oil riches. She comments, "When I got there, people pushed and shoved as if there was a famine—famine in the land of oil... Should we forget about our dream for a decent life, or even just fresh water? Our souls are parched and barren—it's terrifying" (135).

Shocked at seeing the soldier downstairs with her mother, Rasha shouts, "What's going on? What are you doing? Why is he here (134)? The mother replies, "I went up to the roof to check on Ziyad's birds, but I couldn't climb down on my own, so he helped me...He's a human being, he has a mother who cries blood for his absence" (135). The mother thus appears to perceive the human aspect in the life of the American soldier who was driven by fate to her home in light of the commands and directives he received from the commanders and the officer. However, he does not harbour resentment or hostility toward Rasha and her mother as a person. The soldier's cooperation with the mother makes this evident since she views it through the perspective of the mother, who has lost three of her sons. Al-Rubai seeks to expose the war mongers and demonstrate that people are the victims whose souls serve as fuel for advancing global agendas.

Nevertheless, the soldier's relationship with Rasha is tense, driven by worry and suspicion rather than greater human principles. Though he tries to change her mind as he demonstrates his humanity, the American soldier is unable to elicit an emotional response from Rasha who sees him as an intruder and usurper, and demands that he leave, claiming that foreign soldiers only came to protect the oil fields and not the people:

SOLDIER. I'm sorry for coming into your house without permission. I'm here to protect you.

RASHA. Leave us alone—we can protect ourselves...But your leaders think about one thing only: how can they steal our oil?

SOLDIER. It seems that dialogue between us is impossible.

RASHA. Dialogue is impossible between the branch and the bullet.

SOLDIER. I'm not a bullet; I'm a wall. This gun protects both you and

me...We've come here to spread democracy and liberate you from a dictatorship.

RASHA. Your journey was a waste of time. You, for example, are here only for your salary. Do you call this liberation?

SOLDIER. I'm bound to fulfill my duty.

RASHA. Is that all you care about? Following orders with no regard for human decency? Are you a puppet at the mercy of your government? (134)

Rasha and the soldier's dialogue depicts the soldier as both victim and victimizer. The nation feels insecure as a result of what he considers to be a protective measure. According to Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg's *10 Excellent Reasons Not to Join Military*, the invasion of Iraq is a curse because of the lie of the government that their country is a target of terrorism; for her, the military and their families are victims, and would be victimizers if they act on the government's directives (5).

Rasha then tells her mother about her experience with the Americans at the aid center: "Their hard faces frightened me, but once they saw we needed them, they seemed to relax a little. Then, a soldier greeted me kindly and asked me about the distribution plan. The Americans started to distribute the aid in an organized way, kicking out anyone who tried to cut in line" (136). However, when one of her students climbed the wall to salute her, an American soldier hit his hands with the butt of his rifle and the boy fell down behind the wall. As a result, Rasha got angry, insulted the soldier, and yelled at him wildly: "I said to him, and to all his fellow soldiers, you are monsters. Even animals are kinder than you. How could you hit a child like that? I said to them, "I know why you hit him, because you are afraid, even of children" (136). The American soldier left to bring his colonel to apologize to Rasha: "They apologized

sincerely. The strange thing was that when they took off their helmets, they looked like normal human beings capable of sorrow, and rational conversation. One of them started talking to me about how much he misses his family and how he got stuck here" (136).

Unlike Rasha who argues that the Americans are victimizers and "have the power to choose," and that "Their people can protest and overthrow their government," the mother thinks differently, acknowledging that the Americans are "stuck" (136). Despite Rasha's refusal, the mother ends the scene by insisting on inviting the soldier to tea: "Now the tea is getting cold. Let's invite the soldier to tea with cardamom and cookies...No buts. I made the tea for him, and he will have it" (136).

This scene marks a major turning point in the play: with the passage of time, Rasha and her mother come to terms with the status quo and realize that the strange bird that has been tossed in was also not at fault and that he has only arrived because of orders. Thus, a different space is created. As Michel Foucault argues, "We do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (23). Foucault concentrates on an "external space" of social life, the actually lived and socially produced space of sites and their relationships. He contrasts "real places" with the "fundamentally unreal spaces" of utopias, which present society in either "perfected form" or "turned upside down"(23). According to Foucault, heterotopias serve as defense mechanisms against the threat of cultural or social homogeneity and are inherent to all cultures, both ancient and modern. Therefore, the existence of heterotopias implies that space is intrinsically

heterogeneous and that inside any dominant discourse, there exist rival discourses that pose a threat to the system's homogeneity. The egalitarian capacity of space to oppose cultural and social power and give voice to oppressed perspectives is thus insisted upon by heterotopias. No system may be immune to subversive action that results in cultural change, according to the sheer existence of these spaces within and in connection to an established spatio-political structure.

At this point, with the family inviting the American soldier to tea, society is presented in a "perfect form," a perfected version of society away from real places that are somehow 'other': disturbing, intense, incompatible, or contradictory. As a result, this space has the potential for social and political movement insofar as it tactically responds to and challenges the spatial environment in which it exists. It is a space rarely seen, a means of escape from authoritarianism and repression. The victim and the victimizer are given a compensatory space that attempts to better and improve human life and human consciousness. Here, "the bullet" and "the branch" could reconcile. The potential for political resistance exists in heterotopia, and it is only through this process that the characters may begin to oppose the spectacle. This new area frees the characters from the constraints of realist narrative conventions. These secondary spaces created by Al-Rubai in the play invites the audience to engage with a discursive set that has been mostly muted by the State.

However, scene four turns the utopia "upside down" and takes the audience back to real places. The scene heightens the play's tension with a space that is "messy", "ill constructed", and "jumbled" (Foucault 27). It exemplifies how merciless and deaf war is, with no distinction between the guilty and the innocent, the victim, and the victimizer. The three insurgents decide to explode the house and end the life of the soldier

regardless of whether it will end the life of the innocent family or not:

SECOND. Let's knock the house down on top of him.

THIRD. What about the mother and daughter?

FIRST. To Hell with them, they'll get what they deserve.

FIRST. Let's deal with this soon. It's up to us to sever the rotten limb from the body. (137)

According to the human rights report, insurgent groups in Iraq who target civilians utilize two primary explanations to justify their actions: first, they argue that anyone who assists the Multi-National Force in Iraq is not a civilian entitled to protection because of his/her cooperation with the US and its coalition. This includes Iraqis working as translators, drivers, and so on. Second, insurgent groups believe that in a struggle to drive foreign occupiers out of Iraq, the aims justify the means; in a war against the world's military superpower, an insurgency with small guns and explosives is forced to target non-military, or so-called "soft" targets. (Whiston et al.) Rasha and her mother, consequently, become a target for these terrorist groups. Rasha shouts, "Ziyad's friends think that the American soldier defiles the house. They warn us not to stay in the house because they are going to blow it up...Mother, they want his head no matter what it takes, even if they have to blow up ten houses" (138). Rasha and her mother are perceived as working for the US military by keeping the American soldier in their house which becomes an arena for settling accounts, a battlefield, and a potentially explosive location, particularly after terrorist groups learn that the Americans have made the roof of the house a point of observation and control.

In his article *Ever the Victim: Never the Victimizer*, Stanton E. Samenow emphasizes that criminals blame others for their misdeeds: "Presenting himself as a

victim is more than a tactic by which a criminal attempts to exonerate himself. He genuinely believes he is in the right. If people do not support his view of himself, they are in error, not he. He then regards himself as a victim of their misinterpretations.” Here, the three insurgents put the blame on the occupying forces and on Ziad’s family, creating an endless loop of victim/victimizer relationships and constantly exchanging roles and usages of spaces.

The final scene depicts a battle for the house, the space that represents the nation. After receiving the letter threatening to blow up the house if the American soldier does not leave, American forces arrive to rescue the soldier and arrest the terrorists. The mother is terrified:

What a disaster! With the American comes only sorrow. A disaster! Houses are like virgins; profaned if occupied by a stranger. Ziyad has left us, two lonely women. What are we going to do if they blow up the house? Where will we go? Our lives are here. My deceased husband and I built it with our hands, brick by brick. Everything in it is tied to a memory and echoes in the soul. How and where will we live? Perhaps it’s not serious. This is Ziyad’s house and therefore belongs to his friends, too. How can they blow up their own house? Well, why wouldn’t they? They will do it. That’s why the American soldier should leave . . . He must leave, so our lives can go back to normal. He and his weapons and his friends must leave. This is the only solution. (138-39)

The relationship of Rasha and her mother to space is crucial for them to manage their sense of identity and the meaning of their experiences. They need connection to place, losing their home means losing their sense of identity and belonging. The concept of the house here roots itself in

spiritual soil and resonates with identity. Hence, space is transformed into a traumatic agent of othering and alienation, a component of the trauma experience itself. The house serves to safeguard a domestic dream devoid of political strife by isolating the family from the heterogeneity of the outside world. Rasha and her mother fail to grasp “that the organization of space is a social product filled with politics and ideology, contradiction and struggle, comparable - as Edward Soja puts it - to the making of history” (243). When the mother asks, “We are unarmed and apolitical. Why don’t they leave us alone?” Rasha answers, “Mother, we are no longer free. Everyone is guilty and must be punished... Belonging to a country like ours is an unforgivable crime” (139).

An American sergeant then arrives for the soldier, which Rasha believes is coming to put an end to their “suffering” and deliver them “salvation” (page 140). A group of soldiers surround the house, and the sergeant enters. He thanks the soldier for his exemplary discipline and vigilance, assuring him that they have come for his protection and to “ambush the terrorists that we want to eradicate, for the sake of America and the world. So, we’ll withdraw from the house and wire it with explosives. When the terrorists come, they will be terminated” (139). The mother and the daughter will be provided with a tent and supplies. Because he is aware of the women’s strong attachment to their home, the American soldier is moved. However, the sergeant awakens him saying: “A good soldier needs a hard heart, sometimes. The greater good calls for action. If we hesitate, soldiers die. For us, it’s a matter of life and death—either kill or be killed. Duty requires us to strike proactively and decisively, not to loiter on rooftops, feeding the birds”! (140) Soldiers are trained to follow orders without question. Orders can be immoral, illegal, and even dangerous if not followed. Thus, Rasha and her mother are to be evacuated because the house has

become a danger to their lives. Helpless, the soldier asks them to leave the house:

SOLDIER. I regret to inform you that this house no longer belongs to you...The greater good requires that you both vacate the premises. Your lives are in danger. We want to protect you...This house is threatened from every quarter. It is our duty to protect you.

RASHA. But where will we go?

SOLDIER. We'll provide you with a tent in a safe place.

RASHA. So, you haven't come to say goodbye? Thank you... As I said before, dialogue is impossible between the branch and the bullet.

The sound of an explosion. The birds fly away. Curtain. (140)

Rasha is aware of the traumatic traces that have left an indelible pain that cannot and will not be simply cured. The roof falls, destroying the house. Such destruction not only abolishes the family's domestic space and way of life, but also symbolizes the destruction of the shared space that encapsulated human interaction and witnessed the change in victim/victimizer relationships.

In conclusion, analyzing traumatic narratives can be extremely beneficial in determining the root cause of social and cultural illnesses. Writing about Iraqis' traumatic experiences is an important step toward allowing their wounds to speak for themselves. *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* (2013) by Abdul Razaq Al-Rubai is an example of victimization trauma that depicts the consequences of the invasion and occupation of Iraq on both the Iraqis and the American military. This paper uses war trauma and the concept of real places and unreal spaces to analyze the relationship between the victim and the victimizer, show how they might exchange spaces/roles, and demonstrate how space

might be used as a signifier of violence. The study shows how victimization and criminal behaviour are closely related, how victim and criminal populations overlap, and how a single person could play multiple roles successively or even simultaneously.

The analysis uses trauma narratives to portray three different types of victims and victimizers at the same time, each of whom occupies a different/the same space. The first features an Iraqi family residing in a house that symbolizes the entire country, with an American soldier living on top of them despite being a victim of his own government and being compelled to follow the rules in order to receive his salary. The second victim is the American soldier. While waiting for the return of the family's abducted son, the soldier flees his own space and is now confined within a bird cage thousands of kilometers away from his own home. The final space is occupied by the third type of victim, insurgents who believe they are victims with the right to fight and kill even innocent people in order to realize their aspirations.

The play features spaces with dual meanings that contrast with real places, spaces where people actually live and socially created spatiality that is both concrete and abstract at the same time. Finally, shifting from real places to secondary spaces invites the audience to engage with a discursive set that is mostly muted by the State in order to recognize that the dynamics of the conflict and occupation dash all hopes for a humane resolution, and that shared humanity could do little to prevent the instigation of war.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *A Strange Bird on Our Roof* was published in Arabic in 2013 and was translated into English by the Iraqi Playwright Amir Al-Arzaki in 2017, in his book *Contemporary Plays from Iraq*. Though translated into English, colloquial Iraqi Arabic words are kept in the dialogue to capture the reality of everyday Iraqis. All quotations are taken from the translated edition.

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