



Themes of Human Suffering in the Short-Story Collection " Washām al-Numūr " by Maytham Hashim Ṭahir A Thematic Study

Dr. Samia Bouallag

Abbes Laghrour University Khenchela, Laboratory of Studies in Arabic Language and Literature
(Si El Haoues University Center of Barika)

bouallag.samia@univ-khenchela.dz

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the thematic structure of the short-story collection *Washām al-Numūr* (The Tigers' Tattooist, 2026) by the Iraqi writer Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir, which comprises fifteen stories, each of whose titles is coupled with a subtitle pointing directly to a major human theme such as love, fear, pain, and memory. The research problem is articulated through the question of how these themes are configured in such a way as to produce a coherent semantic and aesthetic vision reflecting the crisis of contemporary humanity. To address this problem, the article draws on the tools of thematic criticism while also engaging with Gérard Genette's theory of paratexts, with the aim of tracing the recurrence of themes and their interweaving within the narrative systems. The analysis has revealed that the stories of the collection are organised around four interrelated thematic axes: first, the axis of "memory and forgetting," which embodies the struggle of the self to preserve its identity; second, the axis of "suffering and psychological fragility," manifested in the dominance of fear, pain, and sorrow; third, the axis of "love and loss" as an existential experience of clinging to life; and fourth, the axis of "social and human values," which addresses questions of motherhood, innocence, and the dialectic of guilt. The study concluded that the author's awareness of the centrality of the "theme" has constituted a profound structural strategy that has transformed dispersed stories into a unified narrative mural laying bare the fragmentation of human existence, thereby granting the collection a distinctive place within the contemporary Arabic short-story corpus.

Keywords: Arabic short story — thematic criticism — human suffering — Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir — paratexts.

Introduction

Contemporary Arabic narrative production, and more specifically the genre of the short story, is undergoing profound epistemological and aesthetic transformations. The short story has moved beyond its classical function of capturing a fleeting event or recounting a linear tale, becoming instead an experimental field for interrogating the human self, sounding its existential



crises, and exposing its psychological fractures. In this context, the Iraqi narrative imagination emerges as one of the most fertile corpora to have engaged with issues of human suffering, all the more so because it has taken shape under pressing historical and social conditions that have made the Iraqi self a focal point in which themes of loss, war, death, and emotional fragmentation are densely concentrated. The collection *Washām al-Numūr* by the Iraqi writer Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir, published by Dār Khuṭūṭ wa-Zilāl in Amman in 2026, constitutes a singular narrative model embodying this orientation; for it does not content itself with conveying reality, but rather reshapes it through a narrative mural that probes the fragility of human existence in the face of the forces of effacement and nothingness (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 5).

This collection derives its methodological and artistic singularity from its precise architectural design. It consists of fifteen short stories, in each of which the author deliberately couples the title with a subtitle that explicitly states the central “theme” (Thème) of the text — such as “love, fear, pain, forgetting, guilt.” This pre-emptive declaration of the theme is not merely a formal classification of content but reflects a deliberate intentional consciousness on the part of the narrator, turning the paratextual guidance into a “reading pact” (Pacte de lecture) orienting the horizon of the reader’s reception. It urges the recipient to engage with the text as a pure case study of the human condition and as the embodiment of an abstract concept, before it is a mere plot reliant on characters and events.

The scholarly significance of choosing this topic lies in the desire to fill a critical gap concerning modern narrative studies. Given the recent publication of the collection (in 2026), it remains a virtually uncharted territory that has not yet been sufficiently approached critically, particularly from the angle of the intersection between “paratexts” and “thematic structure.” This lacuna in previous scholarship lends the present research a character of novelty and pioneering effort in decoding this literary achievement. To this are added objective and personal motives consisting in the pursuit of tracking the manifestations of anxiety and psychological fragmentation in Iraqi literature, and in understanding the aesthetic and linguistic mechanisms by which the writer transforms abstract feelings such as fear and pain into entities that pulsate with life within the text.

On the basis of these premises, the central research problem is formulated as follows: What are the main human themes that have constructed the narrative imagination in the collection *Washām al-Numūr*? And in what way has the pre-emptive declaration of these themes in the subtitles contributed to forming a semantic and aesthetic vision reflecting the crisis of contemporary humanity?

Several procedural sub-questions branch off from this problem and guide the analysis: How has the dichotomy of memory and forgetting been embodied in the destinies of the characters as a struggle between the preservation of identity and erasure? To what extent has the narrative succeeded in depicting psychological fragility, manifested in fear and pain, through a network of



recurring images and symbols? And what are the mechanisms by which social values and emotional bonds (such as motherhood, love, and innocence) are employed in order to confront — or, in the case of guilt, to deepen — this existential fragmentation?

Engaging with these problems through reading and interpretation has required, in view of the nature of the narrative corpus, recourse to the procedures of thematic criticism (*La critique thématique*) according to the conceptions of its pioneers such as Jean-Pierre Richard and Charles Mauron, given that it is the method best suited to tracking the recurrence of themes, monitoring their dynamics, and uncovering the semantic systems (images, symbols, lexical fields) that dominate the unconscious of the text. Thematic criticism does not treat the theme as an abstract idea but rather as a tangible linguistic presence that recurs throughout the literary work, granting it its organic unity. The research also draws on the operational framework of Gérard Genette's theory of paratextuality (*Paratextualité*) in order to analyse the function of the titles and their close relationship with the narrative text (Bel'ābid, 2008, pp. 15, 30).

To embrace the dimensions of the subject comprehensively and to unpack its semantic units, this article is organised into four main sections. The first section is devoted to the paratexts of the text and their function between semantic orientation and thematic declaration; the second investigates the dichotomy of memory and forgetting as a struggle to assert identity; the third explores the manifestations of suffering and psychological fragility; and the fourth is dedicated to examining the bonds of existence through the questions of love, motherhood, and guilt. The research concludes with a conclusion summarising the most prominent scholarly and aesthetic findings.

I. The Paratexts of the Text Between Semantic Orientation and Thematic Declaration

In contemporary narrative and critical studies, the literary text is not represented as a solid linguistic block sealed upon itself; rather, it is regarded as an open space surrounded by a network of parallel signs and intertextual relations that fence its external perimeter, organise the reader's horizon of expectations (*Horizon d'attente*), and pave the way for the reader's first contact with the main text. The French critic Gérard Genette has termed this network "paratexts" (*Paratexts*), defining them as "the totality of those parallel texts that surround the text or a part of it and are separated from it, such as the title of the book and the titles of chapters or inserted paragraphs" (Bel'ābid, 2008, p. 30). These paratexts assume considerable importance within the framework of thematic criticism in particular, for "whoever fails to attend to the nature and quality of paratexts will stumble over them; and whoever does not know how to distinguish between them — in terms of their kinds, natures, and functions — will miss the gates of the text and remain outside it" (Bel'ābid, 2008, p. 15). Indeed, paratexts establish an initial interpretive pact that restrains random reception and orients it towards the layers of meaning intended by the creator.

Given the meticulous architecture of *Washām al-Numūr* by the Iraqi writer Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir, published by *Dār Khuṭūṭ wa-Zilāl* in Amman in 2026 (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 5), we



observe that the paratexts in this work do not stop at the classical function of externally “naming” the texts but go further to become directly implicated in the production of meaning, transforming into a deliberate and considered announcement of the central “theme” (Thème) that governs the architecture of each story and orients its major meanings. This functional shift from “naming” to “thematic declaration” turns the paratexts of this collection in particular into a strategic textual device rather than a passing formal ornament — something we will demonstrate analytically by dismantling the structure of two key elements: the main title of the collection, on the one hand, and the internal subtitles of the stories, on the other.

1.1. The Significance of the Main Title (Washām al-Numūr): The Semiotics of Memory and Resistance to Erasure

The cover title is regarded as the major paratext and the primary semantic guide, performing an enticing and designative function at the same time. As Qaṭṭūs (2001) observes, “the title becomes a compressed sign with a semiotic indexical dimension; and insofar as it is a semiotic sign, it founds a vast textual space that may ignite what has been dormant or quiescent in the recipient’s consciousness or unconscious — a cultural or intellectual load with which the recipient immediately begins the process of interpretation” (Qaṭṭūs, 2001, p. 36). By selecting the title Washām al-Numūr (The Tigers’ Tattooist) as the brand of his collection, the author places the reader before a composite linguistic and semantic structure that raises a profound existential question concerning the relationship of the human self to its body, its memory, and its identity threatened with erasure (Ṭāhir, 2026, cover).

Morphologically and lexically, the word “Washām” comes on the intensive pattern of (fa‘‘āl) in Arabic — a hyperbolic form denoting repetition, continuity, and a craftsmanship coupled with deliberate pain through the pricking of needles. The tattoo, in its anthropological and cultural essence, represents the act of producing a permanent and intentional material trace in the body, one that is not erased by the passage of time. This refers thematically and directly to the idea of “engraving memory” into the flesh of human existence as a resistance to the forgetting that lies in wait. As for the second word in the genitive construct, “al-Numūr” (the tigers), it carries iconic connotations deeply rooted in human cultural imagination, associated with savage power, ferocity, and predation; thereby producing a pivotal visual paradox in the structure of the title: how can “the tigers” be tamed and domesticated (since they symbolise metaphorically the harshness of pain, the cruelty of time, or the ferocity of wounding memory) through the fragile human act of tattooing? This paradox lies at the very heart of the collection’s thematic vision.

This profound signification becomes clearly manifest in the first story, which bears the title of the collection itself, where the tattoo is presented as an existential weapon to which the characters resort in order to resist erasure and loss. This is expressed openly in the narrative text when the narrator interprets the deep psychological motives behind the inscription of names on bodies, saying:



He cannot find an explanation other than the struggle against forgetting for the one who tattoos a name; for the body is the first book of memory, and the names tattooed on the wrists are nothing but proofs of love that refute oblivion (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 10).

This citation entrenches a precise poetic equation: body = book, tattoo = writing, and the tattooed name = the decisive proof of existence. This is an equation that transcends the romantic dimension and asserts an existential philosophy holding that human memory, once materially embodied, becomes an indelible trace.

This philosophical dimension deepens when the narrator depicts the impossibility that erasing the bodily tattoo might lead to obliterating the spiritual trace; for the wise old man in the waiting room says to the young man who has come to request the removal of his beloved's name:

Erase your beloved's name on the edges of life: nothing will remain in your soul except that which has a true root, anchored to a degree that no one can uproot, deep like an apple tree, fixed like death (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 18).

This passage embodies par excellence what is known in thematic criticism as the “generative theme” (Thème Générateur), namely that semantic core from which the remaining images and sub-themes of the text emanate; for resistance to erasure is not confined to a single story but is the semantic artery that pulses in the veins of the whole collection.

In this profound and complex sense, the title Washām al-Numūr transcends its status as a mere external label to become an explicit thematic declaration of the “eternal battle of humanity against effacement and obliteration.” The events, traumas, and bonds experienced by contemporary humanity leave deep scars (tattoos) in its existence that neither the vicissitudes of time nor the will of others can erase, just as the tattooist does when he sinks his needle into living flesh to immortalise a trace that refuses to fade. This is also affirmed by studies on memory and identity in narrative; the Syrian critic Jamāl Shaḥīd holds that modern literary writing essentially represents “an act of summoning the lost memory in the face of the forces of marginalisation and erasure that time exercises upon the defeated human being” (Shaḥīd, 2011, p. 15).

1.2. Subtitles and the Thematic Pact

Among the most prominent experimental and stylistic features of the collection Washām al-Numūr is the architecture of the internal subtitles of the stories. The author has abandoned the classical model of naming, which leaves it to the reader to extract the central idea on his own, opting instead for a deliberate strategy that may be called “pre-emptive thematic declaration” (Thematic Declaration). It is a strategy of dual structure that combines the abstract with the concrete, and the idea with its narrative image. Returning to the table of contents of the collection, we find that the titles are formulated according to a regular binary composition: they begin with the determination of the “abstract theme,” followed by a colon, and then the “metaphorical title of the story” that embodies that theme in the form of a sensory image or particular narrative scene (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 5).



This paratextual architecture is manifested in numerous examples constituting a coherent pattern throughout the collection:

- Guilt: An Old Scarecrow Gagged (Washām al-Numūr, p. 21)
- Fear: The Whirlpool of the Endless Yellow Thread (Washām al-Numūr, p. 31)
- Life: The Forest of Names (Washām al-Numūr, p. 39)
- Illusion: The Weaver of Dark Clouds (Washām al-Numūr, p. 61)
- Love: The Frame of Eternity (Washām al-Numūr, p. 79)
- Pain: A Cat in a Khaki Robe (Washām al-Numūr, p. 95)
- Joy: The Emerald of Time (Washām al-Numūr, p. 103)
- Sorrow: The Colour of the World (Washām al-Numūr, p. 133)

This binary paratextual configuration achieves two fundamental critical ends within the structure of the collection.

The first: the establishment of a strict “reading pact” between the author and the recipient. The declaration of the word (fear) or (guilt) at the head of the paratext places the reader in a state of prior mental and psychological orientation aimed at capturing the manifestations of this feeling within the folds of the narrative and tracing its mechanisms. Here, the author’s vision converges with what thematic criticism affirms: “The title can deconstruct the text in order to recompose it by fathoming its indexical and symbolic structures” (Ḥamdāwī, 1997, p. 96). This pact is concretely manifested in the story “Fear: The Whirlpool of the Endless Yellow Thread,” where the author does not merely narrate events but dismantles the mechanism of fear itself inside the body and soul of the character. The narrator describes the state of ‘Alam al-Dīn, who is inhabited by panic:

Everyone who comes near ‘Alam al-Dīn’ feels that there is a vast, ceaseless bell within his chest. Since yesterday his heart has betrayed him; the throbbing reached a degree that made him lose control of his nerves, his bladder, his bowels, and his tear ducts — his heart almost burst from his chest in terror (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 32).

This precise anatomical description of the bodily incarnation of fear is nothing but a direct narrative translation of the theme declared in the paratext.

The second: the transformation of the narrative from its purely reportorial and storytelling character to an “allegorical” character. When the author titles his story “Joy: The Emerald of Time” or “Sorrow: The Colour of the World,” he is not narrating the story of particular individuals in a specific time and place, but rather telling the story of “Sorrow” itself — how it colours and embodies itself in the form of people and things — and the story of “Guilt” — how it takes the form of an old scarecrow guarding a land contaminated by guilt across generations. This abstraction elevates the collection from the level of individual tale to the level of philosophical contemplation of the great human suffering that is not bound by time or place. This allegorical dimension is manifested par excellence in the story “Guilt: An Old Scarecrow Gagged with



Adhesive Tape,” where the sons bear the stigma of their father’s guilt as an inherited burden from which there is no escape; the narrator says:

All the details of life and its events have flowed and poured into the dreadful river of oblivion, except for the suppressed memory of that grave guilt he committed twenty-eight years ago (Tāhir, 2026, pp. 21–22).

It is as though guilt were a living entity that refuses to die and resists forgetting, just as the tattoo does in the first story.

This allegorical vision deepens in the story “Illusion: The Weaver of Dark Clouds.” Here, sorrow does not remain merely a feeling afflicting the character but transforms into an entire perceptual apparatus that redraws the entire world according to its own colours; the character loses the ability to distinguish between smells, colours, and sounds — in an anti-vital metaphor:

Azal loses the sense of harmony, so she sees things in disparate forms... She no longer distinguishes a scream from a whisper, nor the sweet from the bitter, nor the smell of smoke from the smell of wild rose, nor the touch of silk from the touch of rough wood (Tāhir, 2026, p. 66).

Thus, “illusion” in the title becomes a composite signifier that compresses an entire philosophical equation: how sorrow colours everything that the human being sees and perceives.

In this comprehensive sense, the subtitles in Washām al-Numūr do not stop at “naming” or “announcing,” but become directly involved in engineering the “thematic meaning” of the whole collection, making each title a binding, twofold key: the key to the abstract theme that orients the mind, and the key to the metaphorical image that moves the heart. This constant parallelism between the abstract and the metaphorical grants the collection its thematic cohesion and makes its titles not just names of separate stories but an integrated semantic system that announces a single philosophical vision: the great human themes such as fear, guilt, sorrow, and joy are not merely narrated — they are embodied, personified, and tattooed in the collective memory of the readers.

II. The Dichotomy of Memory and Forgetting and the Struggle for Identity

In the thematic vision (Thematic Vision) proposed by Maytham Hāshim Tāhir through the texts of his collection, memory does not appear as a mere passive reservoir deposited in the depths of consciousness, ready to be called upon when needed; rather, it is in its essence an existential act of resistance, exercised against annihilation and effacement — an act that bestows upon the human self its meaning and anchors its presence in the face of the current of disappearance. Conversely, forgetting is not presented as innocent absence or as well-deserved rest but as a lurking existential enemy that aims at obliterating existence and shattering identity until no trace of the human being remains in the world of the living. Thus, the great dichotomy (memory/forgetting) is established in the collection as a generative semantic core from which the



other sub-themes proliferate and from whose womb the diverse narrative images and linguistic configurations emerge — from the tattoo to guilt, from fear to sorrow.

It must be noted that this dichotomy does not function in the collection according to the strict binary opposition (Binary Opposition) that organises presence against absence in a fixed hierarchical arrangement, but rather operates according to a more complex and elusive logic. The boundaries of memory and forgetting frequently overlap and become entangled, with forgetting itself becoming a kind of inverted memory, and the act of remembering sometimes turning into something resembling punishment rather than salvation. This bestows upon the collection its dialectical philosophical character, going beyond the level of the tale to that of the existential anatomy of contemporary humanity besieged between the weight of what has passed and the loss of what is to come. This dichotomy is embodied in multiple narrative images that range from bodily inscription to psychological flight and emotional surrender, as will be examined in detail in the two following stories.

2.1. Memory as an Existential Wound Resisting Erasure

If, in traditional literature, forgetting is often presented as a blessing that alleviates the burden of sorrow and allows the soul to free itself from the weights of the past, in the imagination of Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir it represents — on the contrary — the “absolute effacement” of identity and of the emotional bonds that form the core of human existence. To approach this existential struggle and embody it in a tangible narrative form, the author resorts to a tangible metaphorical configuration represented by the act of (tattooing), making the body a living document that does not admit falsification nor submit to the vicissitudes of time (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 10).

In the story Washām al-Numūr — which constitutes the frame story and establishes the thematic vision of the entire collection — we encounter the main character in the waiting room of a dermatologist. This clinical setting is not chosen arbitrarily; rather, it bears a doubly symbolic significance. On one hand, it refers to the ailing body in need of treatment; on the other, it refers to a space of waiting, hesitation, and the struggle of the will. The protagonist (the tigers’ tattooist) has come to remove the name of his deceased beloved tattooed on his wrist, in compliance with the condition imposed by his new fiancée, who sees in the tattoo a domination of the past over the present. Here the acute psychological conflict between “fidelity to memory” and “the conditions of continuing to live” emerges as an irreconcilable dichotomy. The protagonist’s awareness of the gravity of the act of erasure and of the self-betrayal it entails is manifested when he explains the true motivation behind the inscription of names on bodies, saying:

The names tattooed on the wrists are nothing but proofs of love that refute forgetting; another may consider that the tattooing of the name of the one we love is an eternal acknowledgement that gives this body its uniqueness; and if we ponder this, we find that it is another form of resistance to forgetting (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 10).



This interpretation provided by the character of the act of tattooing reveals a rare philosophical awareness: the tattoo here is not a bodily ornament but an existential covenant by which the human being authenticates his testimony to his love, his life, and his identity.

The narrative then develops to place us before the harsh central paradox of the story's structure: the very needle that once inscribed the name to protect it from forgetting is the same needle that will work upon the skin in disfigurement to erase it, as though the author were indicating that the tools of creation and destruction are one and the same, and that the boundary between preserving memory and killing it is too fine to be grasped by reason alone. Nevertheless, the author ultimately sides with the power of memory through a deep philosophical dialogue between the protagonist and an elderly man in the waiting room — a man who bears in his body the scars of war, captivity, and loss, and who has likewise tattooed the name of his beloved, who ended her life by slitting her wrists. The old man cautions the protagonist against the abyss of erasure:

Erase your beloved's name on the edges of life: nothing will remain in your soul except that which has a true root, anchored to a degree that no one can uproot, deep like an apple tree, fixed like death (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 18).

The old man does not stop at this emotional warning but adds a remarkable dialectical dimension when he says: "What is on the wrist is but a trace of erasure that does not indicate what has not been erased in the heart" (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 18), thereby distinguishing between the erasure of the bodily tattoo and the erasure of the spiritual trace, which remains so long as the memory has a true root in existence.

Through this carefully crafted narrative framing, memory in this story is transformed into an open wound, whose remembrance represents not so much pain as its forgetting represents betrayal of existence itself and apostasy from identity. Through these subtle dramatic conflicts, the author establishes a deep anthropological equation: the human being is not only the sum of what he remembers, but also the sum of what he refuses to forget despite all social pressures and constraints. This idea extends to the story "Life: The Forest of Names" (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 39), which shares the same semantic dimension of asserting identity and keeping it alive against effacement; yet it adds to it a collective dimension that transcends the individual struggle to encompass the human being's struggle against the mechanisms of institutional and social erasure.

2.2. Complicity with Forgetting and the Mirage of Salvation

In contrast to the fierce resistance to forgetting embodied in the story Washām al-Numūr, Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir presents in the story "Forgetting: Algae That Devour the Lamps" (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 143) another, even darker face of this existential struggle: the face of the self that surrenders to forgetting and is complicit with it — not out of cowardice or indifference, but as a flight from the weight of reality and from a horror that makes remembering an unbearable burden for human existence. This second position represents the hidden face of the same struggle: after



having seen how the protagonist resists effacement, we now see how others choose to surrender to forgetting, in the belief that it is salvation.

The author opens his story with a dense metaphorical configuration manifested in the subtitle itself (*Algae That Devour the Lamps*): the lamps symbolise reason, memory, and the glowing consciousness that illuminates identity and anchors it, while the “algae” symbolise the forgetting that does not assault all at once but rather proliferates slowly in the dark and the silence until it stifles this consciousness and entirely obliterates the details of existence. This is consistent with Bachelard’s view that the poetic image is not a mere description of a thing but rather “an agile and surprising emergence on the surface of the soul” (Bachelard, 1984, p. 17). Indeed, the visual image chosen by the author for his title is not ornamental but a complete psychic space in which the struggle of consciousness and unconsciousness in confronting the encroachment of forgetting is condensed.

This unconscious psychological state becomes clearly manifest in the characters’ attempts to dissociate themselves from their memory burdened with the fractures, wars, and disappointments that have stamped Iraqi and broader Arab reality. Forgetting becomes for them not a desire for rest but a desire to become something else — a lighter entity, more capable of continuing in life. Yet the author reveals with great precision that this complicity does not lead to the hoped-for salvation; rather, it transforms the self into a deformed creature deprived of its roots and identity — a fate expressed by the narrator in the story *Washām al-Numūr* in the context of speaking about the act of listening to forgetting and surrendering to it:

To listen to forgetting does not mean that we yield; for listening is not synonymous with surrender but means creating a distance in which we test ourselves, and the extent to which we sail to what lies beyond memory. To erase the tattoo is listening, not surrender (Tāhir, 2026, p. 18).

This subtle creative passage establishes a fundamental philosophical distinction between “listening to forgetting” as a conscious act through which the self attempts to measure the distance separating it from its past, and “surrender to forgetting” as a total capitulation and withdrawal from one’s true existence.

Thus, the thematic analysis of these two elements reveals that the dichotomy (memory/forgetting) in the collection *Washām al-Numūr* is not merely a mechanism for retrieving past events or obliterating them but is an “existential motor” that tests the humanity of the characters and reveals the extent of their capacity to endure under the pressures of time, society, and loss. In both stories, the author does not pass moral judgements on his characters but monitors with phenomenological objectivity the human reality in which memory and forgetting do not grow separately but intertwine their roots in a single existence: memory keeps the characters alive even when they are in pain, and forgetting — when chosen — reduces them to



algae that live in the darkness of existence rather than in its light. This constitutes the semantic axis that lends the collection as a whole its distinctive philosophical character.

III. The Manifestations of Suffering and Psychological Fragility

If the previous section revealed the suffering of the narrative self in its struggle with effacement and time, the narrative achievement of Washām al-Numūr moves the reader towards a deeper layer of existential exposure: the inward probing of “psychological fragility” as a structural phenomenon dominating the worlds of the collection and manifested in an interwoven system of major affects — fear, illusion, and pain. In this transition from the struggle of memory to the anatomy of fragility, there is a fundamental deepening of the creative project of Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir, who declares in his introductory text that “the essence of storytelling is to embody what the human mind abstracts” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 7). This is an early announcement that suffering in this collection is not one theme among others but the primary raw material from which the entire narrative edifice is constructed.

Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir does not content himself with monitoring these emotions as fleeting external reactions; rather, he turns them into what — using Paulo Freire’s critical term — may be called “generative themes” (Thèmes générateurs): those semantic cores that do not adorn the text from without, but from which the text’s internal structure and network of narrative and symbolic relations emerge (Freire, 2009, p. 112). Suffering here is not an accidental attribute attached to the character from without, but rather existence itself, which intersects with the phenomenological vision laid down by Heidegger when he distinguishes between fear, as an affect with a determined external object that disappears when the object disappears, and anxiety, as an original ontological affect in which the truth of human existence — thrown into the world without guarantee or support — is disclosed. Anxiety, therefore, is not a transient psychological state but the fundamental manner in which the self confronts its freedom and its full existential responsibility (Heidegger, 2012, p. 234). In what follows, we trace the manifestations of this fragility in the most prominent texts of the collection.

3.1. Fear as Overpowering Sovereignty: The Split Between Internal Terror and the Anxiety of Reality

“Fear: The Whirlpool of the Endless Yellow Thread” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 31) is one of the texts in the collection that most deeply digs into the unconscious layers of the human self and most prominently anatomises the psychology of accumulated terror — a terror that does not announce itself all at once but seeps in slowly until it tightens its grip on existence. The author places us before the character of ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Dahhān, the man sitting in a cardiologist’s waiting room and suffering from a terrifying disturbance in his heartbeat — not because of an organic ailment that can be diagnosed and treated, but because of a pathological terror and a persecution complex (Paranoia) that make him imagine that the entire world is lying in wait for him and conspiring to kill him. Every gaze that falls upon him is, in his imagination, a weapon aimed at him by some



hidden enemy, and every whisper he hears becomes evidence of a tightly woven plot. The author has chosen for this character a highly significant narrative setting: the medical waiting room is not merely a spatial environment but a metaphorical space embodying the human condition suspended between an as-yet-undiagnosed illness and an as-yet-unconfronted fear.

In depicting this troubled psychological state, the author employs the metaphor of the “bell” striking unceasingly in the protagonist’s chest — an image that transforms fear from a silent internal affect into a resonant sound heard by no one but him:

‘Alam al-Dīn al-Dahhān’s heart beats appallingly, like a giant bell that never ceases to shake his ribs... ‘Alam al-Dīn mutters: ‘My heart pumps blood like a madman’ (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 31).

The significance of the bell is not confined to describing the physiological disturbance; it also extends to the meaning of alarm and warning. Historically, the bell is a warning sound that announces the approach of danger; when a man’s heart is turned into a bell that perpetually rings, this means that its owner lives in a state of constant existential vigilance that does not abandon him even in moments of apparent calm. This fear does not stem from a real, present danger but is the rebound of a painful childhood trauma dating back to a night in the spring of 1991, when masked gunmen broke into his house while he was five years old, and his father was taken before his eyes never to return. The author has been able to consolidate the link between the original trauma and its current echoes through the technique of analepsis (Analepse), which inserts the past into the present without warning, embodying what trauma psychology refers to as “bodily memory” — the memory that stores terror in the organs and nerves and not merely in mental consciousness.

Here, the literary narrative intersects deeply with the major frameworks of psychoanalysis. Freud, in his approach to the concept of neurotic terror, affirms that “the neurotic anxiety that swells inside the individual does not stem from dread of a real threat, but is an unconscious response to a repressed complex that wears the mask of external danger in order to justify its existence” (Freud, 1998, p. 85). This is precisely what ‘Alam al-Dīn embodies; his fear of the eyes surrounding him in the waiting room is not fear of the present but the fear of the child who saw his father dragged away in the night — a fear that has transformed over time from a stifled scream into a complete logic of life that classifies the world into killers and victims, a classification that is not shaken by logic nor corrected by evidence. The author then adds a subtle dialectical dimension when ‘Alam al-Dīn acknowledges the paradox of his awareness of his own state, saying: “‘Alam al-Dīn knows about those promises in his strange leaning that he cannot resist towards becoming attached to married women” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 35) — a confession that reveals that fear in ‘Alam al-Dīn’s personality is not an isolated condition but a system in which multiple complexes are intertwined, each feeding the others.



To translate this complex psychological repression narratively and to transform it from an internal state into a visible image, the author has invented a visual symbol of remarkable density — “the whirlpool of the yellow thread” emanating from the sides of the child’s yellow woollen jacket, which at the moment of psychological climax becomes a dizzying labyrinth into which the protagonist plunges until he completely loses his balance. This symbol intersects with what the anthropologist Gilbert Durand calls “symbols of descent and fall”; he holds that “rotation and descent in a whirlpool represent in the human imagination an authentic expression of existential regression and of the anxiety of the engulfment of the self by darkness” (Durand, 2006, p. 120). What distinguishes Maytham Ṭāhir’s deployment of this symbol, however, is that he does not make the whirlpool an external symbol attached to the character but makes it emanate from within the body itself — from the heart of the jacket the child wears. Consequently, the destruction the whirlpool foretells is not destruction coming from without but is the self’s own making and production. This is what elevates the philosophical tragedy of the story and transforms fear from a reaction into a destiny.

3.2. The Dialectic of Pain and Illusion: The Ailing Body as a Narrative Space

Alongside fear as an overpowering sovereignty that tightens its grip on existence, psychological fragility in the collection is founded upon a more complex and more painful interaction: the interplay between “pain” — physical, residing in the body as a witness to the wounds of the soul — and “illusion” — psychological, to which the broken self resorts when it is unable to confront reality as it is. This complex interaction is manifested with conspicuous artistic mastery in the two stories “Illusion: The Weaver of Dark Clouds” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 61) and “Pain: A Cat in a Khaki Robe” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 95), which together form an integrated semantic dyad covering the dimensions of human fragility from within and from without.

In the story “Illusion,” the sick self contemplates its reality through a distorted mirror that does not reflect the truth but reshapes it according to the logic of desire and loss. The character of the girl “Azal” emerges; she suffers from a dissociative disorder (Dissociation) caused by the calamity of the sudden death of her mother, becoming in her disturbed consciousness the ghost of her deceased mother in a complete alienation of identity, as though loss had not been content with stealing the mother but had also stolen the daughter from herself. The author embodies this alienation in a concise sentence of immense semantic weight:

Azal, afflicted with a rare psychological disorder in which she takes on the personality of her deceased mother, imagines that she has a little daughter whose curly hair, together with her brown face, resembles a dark cloud — and who in reality is her own true replica (Ṭāhir, 2026, pp. 74–75).

What makes this narrative image striking is that it declares explicitly that illusion here is not a transitory weakness but the only form by which the self could keep its dead mother alive — and itself alive as well. This makes illusion in this story an act of life, not an act of illness. The



author goes further in embodying this alienation when he indicates that the psychiatrist himself stands helpless before the scene; for “the psychiatrist finds himself before a scene that does not repeat itself save once every thousand years, or perhaps has never happened before and will never happen, when he sees his patient ‘Narjis’ embracing a void” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 74). In this last sentence there is a rare philosophical concentration: embracing the void is not a pathological symptom but the truest image of the human being’s pain when he loses the one who constitutes the meaning of his existence.

This psychological substitution of personalities and the attempt to compensate for loss by illusion is explained by the philosopher Paul Ricœur from the angle of the problematic of human time. He explains that the aching memory resorts to the imaginary in order to fill the gaps of the lost past, since “nothing resists the erosion of time except the imaginative ruse, which reproduces the absent as a presence, transforming the illusion of memory into a present reality in order to save the self from the tragedy of loss” (Ricœur, 2009, p. 94).

What Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir adds to this theoretical vision is its particular feminine dimension; the two central characters in this context (mother and daughter) embody together the cycle of loss and illusion that does not end with one death but is inherited from one generation to another, giving illusion a social and anthropological character that transcends the individual case.

In the story “Pain: A Cat in a Khaki Robe,” the body itself becomes a narrative space upon which fragility is inscribed and read in its contours. It is no accident that the author chose to set many of the stories in the collection in medical waiting rooms and clinics; these architectural spaces are par excellence the places of the surrendered body and the exposed soul, where people sit next to one another without knowing the magnitude of the pain each one carries. To embody these worlds, the author relied on the technique of interior monologue and the precise description of the contours of the ailing bodies. The contemporary Arabic novel and short story have witnessed a critical shift consisting in the elevation of the body from a mere décor or external framework for events to a central focus on which signification is founded. The critic Jamāl Būṭīb argues that “the body in modern Arabic narrative is no longer a mere material support upon which events take place, but has become a complex metaphorical and cultural structure that produces meaning and refers to the deficiencies of reality and its political and social references” (Būṭīb, 2018, p. 22).

This critical characterisation applies completely to Ṭāhir’s method in his collection, which has made the ailing body — particularly in the (mother and daughter) dyad — a generator of meaning and a producer of signification, and a stage from which discourses on disappointment, loss, and the inheritance of bereavement proliferate.

At the level of the rhythmic structure of the text, this appropriation of pain accords with the rules that govern the configuration of narrative time. Laḥmidānī affirms that the rhythm of narrative does not proceed at a single linear pace but is subject to the techniques of “summary,”



“scene,” and “pause” according to the density of the event and the inner state of the characters (Laḥmidānī, 2000). This principle is clearly manifested in the texts of the collection; for psychological and physical illness imposes upon the text a tense, fragmented rhythm that breaks the linearity of narration, making the discontinuity of narrative rhythm an artistic equivalent that mimics the internal rupture of the character and the disturbance of his consciousness.

This discontinuity and rhythmic tension is precisely what Ṭāhir has adopted in constructing his scenes; the narrative camera moves between the gazes of the patients, their spasms, and their heavy silence, conveying pain from its physiological-organic level to its deeper philosophical-existential level. The ailing body in *Washām al-Numūr* thus becomes not just a body in pain but a document of human suffering written in the language of flesh and blood, needing no translation, because it is universal in its essence and human in its significance.

IV. The Bonds of Existence: Love, Motherhood, and the Dialectic of Social Values

In contrast to the psychological disintegration, the existential isolation, and the fragility of the self uncovered in the previous sections, the collection *Washām al-Numūr* presents what might be called the “relational themes” (Thèmes relationnels): those major human bonds that represent humanity’s last and most desperate attempt to cling to the meaningfulness of life in the face of nothingness. After the characters have lost their trust in time within the framework of the dichotomy of memory and forgetting, and their psychological equilibrium has collapsed under the weight of fear, illusion, and pain, the relational bonds — love, motherhood, belonging — remain the final thread connecting the human being to his humanity and keeping him on the edge of the abyss.

However, in the imagination of Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir, these bonds are not presented in their idealised romantic framework, sanitised of contradiction, nor in an ideological framework that gratuitously glorifies the major social values. Rather, they appear weighed down by sacrifices, sins, and existential sorrow — bonds that save and destroy at the same time, that grant meaning and strip it away in a single moment. This makes them, in the context of this collection, dialectical and not resolutive themes, deepening human tension rather than resolving it, and confronting the reader with searing ethical and existential questions that provide no ready-made answers. Roland Barthes, in a closely related context, observed that a text that carries major social values without subjecting them to critical interrogation “produces a closed ideological discourse,” whereas a text that makes these values a field of struggle rather than declaration “produces an open text that liberates the reader rather than appeases him” (Barthes, 1992, p. 47). This is exactly what Ṭāhir does in the stories at this level of his collection.

These complex relational bonds are distributed across the stories of the collection in three intertwined major themes: saving and burdening motherhood, as manifested in the story “The Mothers: The Chain of Creation” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 111); anxious love, which does not lead to union but to self-knowledge through loss, as manifested in the story “Love: The Frame of



Eternity” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 79); and the dialectic of guilt and innocence as a struggle between what is imposed by social values and what is dictated by the deepest manifestations of human existence, as revealed in the story “Guilt: An Old Scarecrow Gagged with Adhesive Tape” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 21). In what follows, we examine these major themes in greater analytical and interpretive detail.

4.1. Motherhood as Refuge and Guardian of Creation

The theme of motherhood takes the lead in the stories of Washām al-Numūr as the purest bond resisting the absurdity of reality and its wars. The story “The Mothers: The Chain of Creation” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 111) constitutes the apex of this narrative treatment. Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir presents motherhood as a counter-force opposing the discourse of war, not as a marginal family role. He builds his narrative on a sharp antithetical dichotomy: “the masculinity of war versus the motherhood of peace.” While men make ruin and killing under the banners of heroism, the mother stands in the world of the story as the chain that guarantees the continuity of existence and prevents its rupture.

The narrator describes this paradox, saying:

Thus the existence of the female has become threatened; she is in need of safety constantly, which is why he subjugated her — whereas in the earliest ages of human lineages, wisdom and authority were in her hands as queen and worshipped goddess. And with the divergence of war, mothers remain necessarily great (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 115).

This statement traces a historical course in which the female has moved from the centre of authority, wisdom, and sacredness to the position of the threatened being upon whose shoulders falls today the burden of protecting meaning in a world torn by wars, while emphasising that the greatness of mothers is a “necessity” and not a choice, because they are the only party capable of regathering the scattered fragments of human existence.

This narrative vision of motherhood agrees with the sociological perspective proposed by Erich Fromm in his approach to the essence of maternal love. He holds that “maternal love differs essentially from passionate love (Eros), because it is unconditional love, and it alone is capable of granting the child — and later the man — a deep sense of belonging and existential security in a world that lacks meaning” (Fromm, 2000, p. 48). Hence the title of the story, “The Chain of Creation,” becomes an exact metaphor; for mothers are the chains that bind humanity to its humanity, prevent it from sliding completely into the barbarism of wars, and transform motherhood from a private emotion into an existential function preserving the continuation of the human species in the face of the threat of annihilation.

4.2. The Tragedy of Love and Attachment to the Absolute

Love in the collection Washām al-Numūr takes a clearly tragic course. It is not narrated as a moment of union and fulfilment but is often recounted from the angle of loss and attachment to



the memory of the absent rather than to his actual presence. This perspective is clearly manifested in the story “Love: The Frame of Eternity” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 79), where we follow the character of an elderly woman who lost her beloved (the architect) decades ago, yet refuses to marry and dedicates her life to communing with his phantom and leafing through his old letters, in something like a long-lasting Sufi ritual that transforms love from a fleeting emotional experience into a permanent mode of being.

The author depicts this quasi-mystical fidelity to memory in a condensed poetic language. The heroine appears as if she lived in the presence of an “Absolute” that never disappears despite his physical absence; she does not sleep without her beloved’s name on her lips, as though it were a nightly prayer not to be missed, and she trusts — as the narrative indicates — that “the One who ordains all decrees will never let down the heart of a lover,” believing firmly that “God invented love.” With this depiction, love transcends its material dimension to become an eternal creed; the “frame of eternity” in the title does not refer merely to the frame of a picture, but to a metaphysical framework that freezes the beloved in an absolute form and preserves him from the absurdity of time and the vicissitudes of reality.

To understand this affective sublimation, one may invoke the theorisation Roland Barthes provided of the lover’s discourse in his book *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. He affirms that “absence is the basic component of the lover’s discourse; in the absence of the beloved, the lover transforms him from a material being into a sacred ‘image’ that he worships, and waiting and loss become the proof of the supreme love” (Barthes, 2000, p. 33). This is exactly what Maytham Ṭāhir’s heroine does: she turns absence into an eternal frame and converts the experience of the beloved’s loss into a source of protection from the cruelty of the present; attachment to the absolute — to the deified image of the beloved — becomes a substitute for any real relationship vulnerable to fracture. In this way, the text reveals that love in this collection is not a promise of happiness so much as a promise of meaning: a meaning born out of the heart of disaster and drawing its legitimacy from its capacity to withstand time, even if the price is that the self remains suspended on the threshold of a past that does not return.

4.3. Guilt and the Authority of the Pursuing Past

Alongside the pure values such as motherhood, love, and innocence (as in the story “Innocence: A Little Wolf,” Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 51), Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir places us in Washām al-Numūr before the dark side of human bonds, represented by paternal sins and the guilt complexes they leave behind, which are not annulled by prescription. The story “Guilt: An Old Scarecrow Gagged with Adhesive Tape” (Ṭāhir, 2026, p. 21) is a striking model for studying this complex. It tells the tragedy of a father who killed his daughter and her lover under the so-called motive of honour, then buried his secret for twenty-eight years under a scarecrow in the field, before this repressed guilt returned in his old age to gnaw at his memory and transform him into a deformed



being whose sons gag his mouth with adhesive tape, in fear of the scandal of his continuous confession of his crime.

In this story, the father's collapsed and gagged body, along with the muffled sound of his blood-stained cough, is transformed into a direct physical embodiment of the sin; for the body is no longer a neutral space but becomes a stage for an internal punishment imposed by the past upon the present. The narrator describes, at a climactic moment, that the father in his old age does not cough up blood alone, but "coughs up straw" — the same straw of which the scarecrow was made under which he had hidden the bodies of his daughter and her lover. Through this symbolic displacement, the author links the material of the crime (the scarecrow and the straw) with the bodily symptoms in the present, declaring that guilt does not remain a mere burdensome memory but returns physically to devour its bearer from within, as though the body itself were demanding confession and rebelling against the mind's attempt to conceal the truth.

In this context, one may invoke what Tzvetan Todorov indicates in his study of fantastic literature when he argues that "the great repressed sin must be embodied narratively in extraordinary deformations; the body rebels against silence and produces pathological and uncanny signs to expose what the mind tries to hide" (Todorov, 1994). This theoretical framework helps clarify the function of the scarecrow in Ṭāhir's story; it is not merely an agricultural tool but a material image of guilt, and the continuous return of its image in the father's old age — through coughing up straw and through the threat of unveiling the secret buried beneath it — turns the past into a pursuing authority from which there is no escape. The text thus demonstrates that the crime protected by the discourse of honour is not erased by social justification but remains a scarecrow standing in the field of memory, stirred by the winds of time whenever its owner thinks that everything has been concealed.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that the collection *Washām al-Numūr* by Maytham Hāshim Ṭāhir is not based on the mere juxtaposition of scattered stories, but is organised within a tightly knit thematic structure that makes each story part of a unified narrative project investigating the fragility of contemporary humanity in its relationship to memory, fear, love, and guilt. The analysis has shown that the author does not treat these themes as isolated mental ideas but transforms them into embodied existential experiences in afflicted characters, ailing bodies, waiting rooms, and spaces saturated with anxiety and breakage.

The reading has demonstrated that the paratexts in the collection fulfil a foundational function in orienting reception; the author declares from the subtitle itself the central theme of each story, thereby establishing a reading pact linking the title to the text and granting the narrative structure considerable internal coherence. From this angle, the paratext becomes part of the production of meaning, not merely an external mark or a dependent formal element.



The study has also concluded that the dichotomy of memory and forgetting forms the most firmly established axis in the collection, because it is directly connected to the question of identity, while other themes — such as fear, illusion, pain, love, motherhood, and guilt — branch off from it. The characters in these stories do not wage their battles only against the external world, but also against internal effacement, which makes psychological and emotional suffering the true centre of gravity in the texts.

Accordingly, it may be said that the singularity of Washām al-Numūr lies in its success in transforming the major human themes into a coherent narrative mural that combines psychological depth, symbolic concentration, and a conscious paratextual construction. The collection thus contributes to enriching the contemporary Arabic short story and opens the way for subsequent readings approaching it from more specialised stylistic, semiotic, and narratological angles.

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