



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Narrating psychological realism and time temporality: A critical study of Shahad Al Rawi's The Baghdad Clock**

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\*Correspondence: [ahmed.aziz@qu.edu.iq](mailto:ahmed.aziz@qu.edu.iq)**ABSTRACT**

Psychological realism in contemporary prose fiction focuses on the internal life of characters, emphasizing subjective experiences and memory. Time, in such fiction, transcends its mechanical measurement and is instead understood through psychological perception. This paper examines *The Baghdad Clock* (2018) by Shahad Al Rawi through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's theory in *Time and Narrative*, exploring how the novel disrupts linear temporality to reflect the psychological trauma of war. The study argues that Al Rawi constructs a non-linear narrative where the past, present, and future converge, creating a temporal structure that mirrors Iraq's national trauma. Utilizing a structural approach and integrating theories of psychological realism and narrative temporality, the study reflects on how memory, trauma, and time shape both personal and collective identities in post-2003 Iraqi fiction. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of temporal disorientation and narrative innovation as responses to prolonged conflict, trauma, and historical rupture in Iraq's recent past.

**KEYWORDS:** psychological realism, time representation, narrative temporality, memory, trauma, Iraq, Shahad Al Rawi, *The Baghdad Clock*

**Research Journal in Advanced Humanities**

Volume 6, Issue 3, 2025

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Submitted: 06 June 2025

Accepted: 18 August 2025

Published: 12 September 2025

**HOW TO CITE**

Saad Aziz, A. (2025). Narrating psychological realism and time temporality: A critical study of Shahad Al Rawi's *The Baghdad Clock*. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.58256/bc9wj30>



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

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## 1. Introduction

Shahad Al Rawi's debut novel *The Baghdad Clock* (2016) has emerged as one of the most significant works in contemporary Iraqi literature, both for its innovative narrative technique and for its poignant exploration of war, memory, and identity. Written in the aftermath of decades of political upheaval, sanctions, and the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, the novel provides a unique lens through which to understand the lived psychological experiences of a generation that came of age amidst constant conflict. Rather than offering a straightforward historical account, Al Rawi constructs a narrative shaped by **psychological realism and temporal disruption**, where the interior worlds of her characters become the primary site of storytelling.

Time and memory stand at the center of this novel's aesthetic and thematic framework. By employing fragmented chronology, dream sequences, and prophetic visions, Al Rawi disrupts linear temporality and instead presents time as a fluid, malleable force. This aligns with **Henri Bergson's concept of *durée***, where time is understood as a subjective flow of consciousness, as well as with **Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative temporality**, in which memory and imagination reorganize chronological events into meaningful but non-linear sequences. In *The Baghdad Clock*, the Baghdad cityscape and its symbolic clock become recurring metaphors for a society suspended in trauma, unable to progress beyond cycles of destruction and loss.

The novel's focus on **childhood and adolescence** adds another dimension to its psychological depth. Through the eyes of the narrator and her friend Nadia, readers witness a distorted experience of time in which past, present, and future merge, reflecting the instability of memory under trauma. Dreams, fantasies, and metafictional moments blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, highlighting how the human mind negotiates war's unbearable truths. Such techniques situate Al Rawi's work within both the tradition of **postmodern narrative experimentation** and the broader context of **trauma literature**, where time itself becomes fractured under the weight of historical violence.

This study argues that *The Baghdad Clock* embodies a distinctive form of **psychological realism** that is inseparable from its **temporal experimentation**. By analyzing Al Rawi's use of disrupted chronology, memory, dreamscapes, and symbolic temporality, the paper demonstrates how the novel captures the fragmented consciousness of Iraqis living through war. Furthermore, the novel resists the closure of linear narratives and instead offers a **national allegory of suspended time**, where the personal and political converge. In doing so, Al Rawi not only redefines Iraqi narrative traditions but also contributes to global conversations on literature, memory, and trauma in post-conflict societies.

## 2. Methodology and Data Collection

This study adopts a **qualitative textual analysis** method, using a **structuralist and narratological framework** to explore the representation of psychological temporality in Shahad Al Rawi's novel. Drawing on **Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative time**, the paper interprets the novel's temporal structure, plot sequencing, character development, and embedded motifs through a close reading. Primary data includes Al Rawi's *The Baghdad Clock*, while secondary data consists of scholarly commentary on psychological realism (Sen, 2020), narrative theory (Ricoeur, 1984; 1980), and trauma studies. Additionally, contextual references from Henri Bergson's philosophy of time and memory are employed to analyze the characters' internal experiences and temporal dislocation.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of *The Baghdad Clock* reveals that Shahad Al Rawi crafts a unique narrative structure that exemplifies the traits of **psychological realism** through its portrayal of temporality and memory. The novel departs from traditional linear storytelling, embracing a **fragmented, cyclical, and symbolic representation of time** that resonates deeply with the internal psychological landscapes of characters living through war. This temporal disorientation reflects the fractured consciousness of a generation growing up amidst constant conflict, displacement, and existential insecurity.

### 3.1. Temporal Disruption and Fragmentation

Al Rawi's novel resists conventional chronology. Time in *The Baghdad Clock* is not measured by external events but by the **intensity of memory, trauma, and imagination**. This is in alignment with Paul Ricoeur's theory that narrative time involves a refiguration of chronological time (*mimēsis*) through the lens of lived experience. Events are not ordered in a cause-and-effect sequence but are recalled, dreamt, or foreseen through **nonlinear temporal frames**. For instance, the opening of the novel introduces a dreamscape that merges the past and the future, creating a **temporal loop** where time seems to stand still.

This disruption of time also functions as a metaphor for the collective consciousness of post-2003 Iraq, in which history has lost its forward momentum, and the nation is stuck in a recurring cycle of destruction. The **Baghdad Clock monument**, often referred to throughout the novel, becomes a **symbol of suspended temporality**, indicating that while the world outside moves forward, Baghdad remains frozen in trauma.

### 3.2. Memory and Psychological Realism

Al Rawi's reliance on **first-person narration** and her focus on **childhood memories and adolescent reflections** are critical to her psychological realism. The narrator and her friend Nadia do not recount historical facts; instead, they reconstruct their reality through **subjective memory**, laced with emotion, fear, fantasy, and confusion. This aligns with **Henri Bergson's** notion of *durée*, where time is felt rather than measured—experienced as a flux of consciousness.

The **blending of past and present** throughout the novel highlights the lingering presence of trauma. For example, the narrator often returns to the moment of the first Gulf War, even while describing later events in the U.S. invasion of 2003. Such **temporal compression** reflects how traumatic memory resists chronological resolution. The characters' **internal worlds** are shaped by a continuous negotiation with their memories, dreams, and the disintegrating social and cultural fabric around them.

### 3.3. The Metaphor of the Clock and Prophetic Time

The recurring image of the **Baghdad Clock** is not merely a background setting but a **living metaphor for time suspended, distorted, and politicized**. The clock stands as a silent witness to Iraq's history of war, sanctions, and occupation. Symbolically, it becomes an embodiment of the **disjunction between personal growth and national collapse**. While the characters grow older and pass through rites of passage—school, love, loss—their society regresses.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a **soothsayer** character who speaks in future tense introduces an element of **prophetic time**, disrupting the narrative further. This figure anticipates destruction and warns of the inevitable erosion of innocence. In Ricoeur's terminology, this is a kind of *emplotment* that reorganizes events to construct meaning within disjointed time. This blending of **folkloric prophecy and psychological realism** adds a metaphysical dimension to time, reinforcing its abstract, haunting nature.

### 3.4. Dreams, Metafiction, and Temporal Ambiguity

Dreams in *The Baghdad Clock* are not just narrative techniques but mechanisms for exploring **the subconscious and the timeless**. Characters drift between dream and reality, often unsure whether they are awake or asleep. This literary device reflects how the mind, in traumatic conditions, seeks refuge in **fantasy** or reimagines the real to make it bearable.

Moreover, the novel is rich in **metafictional moments**, especially when the narrator questions the logic of her memories or doubts the reality of events. This metafiction introduces **temporal ambiguity**, placing the reader in the same uncertain temporal field as the characters. These layers of self-awareness and narrative questioning enhance the psychological depth of the novel and its postmodern sensibility. As recent pedagogical research on multimodal learning environments suggests, visual and narrative media enhance cognitive immersion and interpretive flexibility (Dhillon, Sinurat, & Herman, 2025) resonating with Al Rawi's own narrative strategies, where dream imagery and fragmented time sequences engage readers in reconstructing meaning through mental visualization and affective response.

### 3.5. *Cultural and Political Implications of Temporal Distortion*

By fracturing time, Al Rawi constructs a narrative that reflects the **cultural, political, and existential fragmentation of Iraq**. The novel resists closure, refuses to adhere to a historical timeline, and instead invites the reader to engage with **emotional truth** over factual history. In doing so, *The Baghdad Clock* becomes not only a story of individual coming-of-age but also a **national allegory**, where the personal and political intertwine through disrupted time.

This is further supported by the dual-layered timeline of the narrative—while the narrator and Nadia experience life within a literal war zone, their psychological reality is shaped by an alternate temporality, one populated by **hope, nostalgia, dread, and longing**. Time, in this sense, is both a **site of resistance and a symptom of trauma**. Al Rawi's technique allows Iraqi voices—often lost in global narratives of war—to reclaim **subjectivity and temporal agency**.

### 3.6. *Discussion*

Al Rawi's novel, when analyzed through **Paul Ricoeur's lens of configured time**, emerges as a narrative of psychological realism that articulates the disintegration of temporal continuity in war-torn Iraq. The narrative renders time as **lived, remembered, and imagined**, rather than measured mechanically. The characters' inner worlds reflect Henri Bergson's theory of **duration (durée)**, wherein time flows subjectively, shaped by memory and emotional experience.

The *Baghdad Clock*, both as a symbol and as a narrative device, reflects the rupture between pre- and post-war identity. War halts historical time and replaces it with psychic temporality. The prophetic voice of "the future" functions as a metafictional technique, foreshadowing inevitable decline and existential dread, while dreams and flashbacks dislocate the present.

This literary experimentation aligns with **postmodern techniques**—fragmentation, intertextuality, and metafiction—while also reflecting regional trauma. Al Rawi's use of dream work and the sage/soothsayer archetype invokes folkloric tradition to bridge the real and the metaphysical. The result is a *trauma-archive narrative*, documenting Iraq's collective memory through literary innovation.

Furthermore, the characters' disconnection from linear time mirrors what **Simon Dentith (1995)** refers to as "a genealogy of loss"—a postmodern disorientation where identity, geography, and history are no longer fixed. Ricoeur's narrative time becomes a vessel for expressing existential uncertainty, as the novel's temporality blurs boundaries between action, memory, and anticipation.

## 4. *Conclusion*

The manipulation of time in *The Baghdad Clock* is a deliberate literary strategy that conveys the **psychological impact of war** on Iraqi identity. By fragmenting narrative time, Al Rawi represents trauma not as a past event but as an enduring, recursive reality. The study demonstrates how the novel adopts **Ricoeur's narrative time** and **Bergson's durée** to articulate temporal confusion and emotional dislocation. Through nonlinear narrative, prophetic symbols, and dreamscapes, Al Rawi's work exemplifies **psychological realism** in post-2003 Iraqi literature. The interpretive demands of Al Rawi's non-linear structure cultivate a form of higher-order cognitive engagement, akin to the reflective learning processes discussed by Aslam (2025), where analytical depth emerges through active negotiation between perception, memory, and meaning. The novel transcends conventional storytelling to become a site of cultural mourning and mnemonic resistance, offering readers a window into the fractured temporalities of war-survivors and the literary representation of memory and identity reconstruction.

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