

Cartography of Mangled Minds: Mazen Maarouf's *Jokes for the Gunmen*

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Abstract

“Power was the most important subject, as far as we were concerned, during the war” (6). The 20th century was dominated by the two World Wars, the Cold War and the post-Cold War conflicts. The 21st century appears to be no better. Just two decades into the new millennium and we are already experiencing the tremors of outbreaks across the globe, notably referred to as terrorism, ethnic conflict, civil wars and hybrid and special operations warfare. These nonstate, intrastate, and interstate violence have had an impact on the lives of millions of people. It is in this context that Booker longlisted work *Jokes for the Gunmen* (2019) by the Palestinian-Icelandic author Mazen Maarouf may be read. Maarouf weaves together twelve stories that offer a kaleidoscope of insights on the impact of war on the civilian population. *Jokes for the Gunmen* is grounded in a conflict zone that is for the most part unspecified, except in the “Gramophone” where it is Lebanon (55) while in “Juan and Ausa” it is Spain. Thus the narratives are universalized to reinforce the idea that war is an act of violence against the global citizen and everybody and everywhere is its target. The characters are never given names except for Hossam in “Other –People’s –Dreams – Syndrome” and Juan and Ausa in the eponymous story. This buttresses the design of the universality of the narratives. The author seems to drive home the fact that no one can claim immunity from war and this becomes only too obvious with the narrative space being

inundated with fatalities. Again, as we march along the narratives, we find that the boundaries between combatants and civilians, battlefronts and domestic spaces have almost blurred. Everyone is now at the combat zone and the combat zone is everywhere. The private domain of the hearth and the home that once signified security and well-being has also been transformed into dangerous territory.

Keywords: War, traumatic ambience, predicaments, social distress, mental distress, horror.

In Maarouf's world, war is being waged on the minds and bodies of defenseless and vulnerable citizens. Clues are given in the narratives to suggest that most of them have been seized from the perspectives of children. The homodiegetic narrator in "The Pepper Plant" is in the first grade of middle school while in "A joke" is a 9 year old and in "Gramophone" a 16 yr old (58). The child's innocence makes the brutality of war not only more palpable but also more irrational. However, most of the children even whilst trapped in their environment are simultaneously ingenious participants in the plot and it is the tension in this that makes their stories so illuminating. Interestingly, the narrator of the last story "Juan and Ausa" is a bull. In this stylistically complex and deeply disturbing story, the animal narrator negotiates his relationship with humans even as he defamiliarizes the human way of perceiving the world.

The narratives vividly capture the traumatic impact of war on both children and adults. The young, impressionable children in *Jokes for the Gunmen* are an intriguing blend of innocence, optimism, courage and foolhardiness. In the face of so much senseless death, they seem to accept the absurd predicaments of their family members. Sometimes they interpret the events happening around them in an abnormal manner which makes the war appear even more horrific. In contrast, the adult world is occupied by a few selfish and cowardly characters. Even the animal world does not go unscathed. The abattoir revels in

mercilessly killing cows, “Cinema” ends recounting the death of both the boy and the cow after a bomb blast and in “Juan and Ausa” the narrator bull harps on revenge.

The ambience of Maarouf’s orb screams of the horrors of war. The stories are peppered with gruesome details which amplify the horrors. “We could hear gunfire from time, to time, but we grew used to it, as one grows used to the honking of passing cards.” (3). The child narrator appears to have easily and readily acclimatized to the war scenario. What is even more significant is that in none of the narratives do we see the child raising any queries regarding the war. They are all focused in dealing with it in their own ways. Even the adults do not discuss the reasons for the war or its consequences. Political discussions are totally absent in the narratives. A mother proudly boasts to her neighbours that her husband “had never even bought a newspaper, and that he had no opinion on what was happening in the country” (35). Her husband goes to extreme lengths to show that he is apolitical. “... he picked up the television and put it under the tree in front of our building. There was nothing wrong with the television; my father just wanted everyone to see that he wasn’t watching anything political” (8). The horrors of war become evident when gunmen use heavy weapons such as mortars and RPGs and terrified family members lie prostrate on the corridors of their homes during bouts of intense gunfire (4) or hide in the underground shelters in their homes (86). Some of them leave their homes and take shelter in a building that is three floors below ground level (69). Nevertheless, it too is razed to the ground and all the refugees are killed. The stories reveal how disfigured bodies are a common sight during the war (12) and it is considered normal to see a dead body or two on television every day (13). Further, the stories recount the horrific deaths of people killed by shells (13), an entire bus of physically challenged students are incinerated and “their bodies fused together” (22), a vacuum bomb that squashes an entire building killing all its inhabitants (56), a cinema theatre that is demolished (69) and a farmer who is killed when a large piece

of shrapnel from a shell destroys his liver (162). The tales show how death and destruction are natural corollaries of war and explicitly describe death under the most gruesome circumstances. Even those who survive are faced with poverty (47) denied basic amenities like food, water (4), electricity (55) and proper accommodation.

When the horrors of war become too dark and depressing for the characters to wrestle with, they take refuge in the realm of magical realism. The strategy is adopted by the victims to help cope with the trauma. The boy in the “Cinema” is the lone survivor. Everybody including his family members has died in the bomb blast. The boy then goes on to narrate his fantastic and imaginary escapades with a cow, the only living creature in the vicinity. He recounts how he fills the cracks in the building with bits of cheese and gives the cow punctured rubber footballs, pieces of broken china, a shoe lace, the buckle of a school satchel, a key ring and mouldy bread to eat (79). The fantastic voyage of the boy along the deserted alleys of the city takes his mind off his predicament. The story predictably ends with the death of both the cow and the boy. Again the son in “Biscuits” makes his mother believe in a fabulous story about an old man who touches cars and turns them into biscuits. He narrates the story in precise detail and with tremendous enthusiasm thus convincing his aged, mentally distraught mother (85). This strategy helps his mother to shift her focus from personal issues like being abandoned by her husband to the immediate problem of not coming into contact with the old man and being turned into a biscuit. Another important strategy that Maarouf has made use of to divert the focus from a potentially traumatic ambience is humour. The state recruited gunmen force the father in “Jokes for the Gunmen” to cheer them up by narrating jokes. If the jokes are not funny enough they beat him up. On the contrary, if it pleases them they display fraternal love (27). The gunmen being in a position of power could have extorted money or favours from the citizens. However, they prefer humour as it appears to be an effective coping strategy. It

helps them handle the stress of their job. Maarouf uses black humour to juxtapose the morbidity of war with the travesty of humour.

The narrative is peppered with characters who suffer from physical and mental ordeal in a war-torn ambience. However, it is the psychological impact that the narratives foreground. Michal Shapira while discussing the second World War comments that “the projected consequences of the coming war included physical casualties and material damage, yet the costs of war dreaded most were social distress and mass mental disorder” (33). Maarouf’s characters exhibit traits of both social distress and mental disorder: a deaf boy who is fear stricken and sticks close to his elder twin brother for protection (3), a father who is beaten up by gunmen for no reason and consequently stops talking becomes absent minded and starts spending more time locked in the bathroom (7), a mother who stops eating and starts smoking heavily and arguing noisily after her son dies in a shell attack. Her other son records her trauma “Because she was the mother of the deceased boy, she was in the depths of despair, totally pale, silent and thin. My brother’s death seemed to have hollowed her out” (25). The 16 year old boy in the “Gramophone” is angst-ridden while delivering the news of his father losing his arms:

I swallowed my own vomit twice and when I arrived I had wrenching pains in my guts. I went into the bathroom and vomited. The vomit tasted very acidic and the acidity seemed to have damaged my throat or my oesophagus, because some blood came out too. (59)

Losing both his arms in the bomb blast is so traumatic for the narrator’s father that he suffers “psychological damage” (59). He becomes irritable, petulant and grouchy. He refuses to trust his wife thus making her a prey to diabetes, hypertension and cardiac problems (63). He also tries to emotionally blackmail his son to donate him his arms. “If you had lost your arms, I would donate one of my arms to you without hesitation. What’s an

arm worth compared to me seeing you happy, or you seeing me happy” (62). The ordeal that the characters undergo is profound and the experience of the boy in the “Cinema” justifies it. A shell attack kills all who seek refuge in the theatre including his mother and sister. He is the lone survivor.

I didn't get up from the seat. I didn't have any reason to get up. The cinema seat was nice and warm. It smelled as if it was stuffed with millions of grains of soft sand, all connected to each other by threads. Very fine threads. I even thought about taking the seat with me to the grave and, instead of being buried lying down, being buried sitting in the cinema seat. I don't know why this idea occurred to me.

I felt very much at ease. There was peace and quiet in the cinema. (71)

The child narrator cannot comprehend the ramifications of all that has happened. He suffers from post-traumatic stress. He is an intriguing blend of innocence and apathy. He accepts the death of his family without any questions. However, when he discusses his own imminent death, the reader realizes that he understands the ramifications of War. The young boy in “A Joke” cannot take up a job as he has to urinate every quarter of an hour. “How does that happen? I don't know? Although I don't drink much water, I always need to urinate, even when I'm asleep” (92). Maarouf's stories show that the child's suffering is not intrinsically different from the adult's; but the child is not able to process it or understand it properly. This may lead to a warped and twisted mind. The narratives show how the trauma of living in a war exploding zone creates fissures in the young impressionable minds. The characters are besieged with fear, terror and guilt. “I blamed myself, because if I hadn't broken off the largest pepper and trodden it underfoot, my father wouldn't have become so weak or so cowardly either” (7), another boy feels guilty for hiding the handle of the gramophone from his father (64). It is this fear and guilt that gnaws them from the inside. Adults too lead mentally traumatized lives. During the war, the mother in “Biscuits” uses

baking to cope with the stress. She bakes biscuit cakes only because her husband relishes them. However, after the war he packs his bag and leaves the family saying he is going for some sporting event and is not heard of for the next twenty years and then mother stops baking. Her desperate son tries to keep her alive by sending her to a care home. “

I know my mother doesn't have Alzheimer's. My mother also knows that. And maybe the doctor does too. But I pay the care-home bills regularly, including those for the Alzheimer's treatment. Not so that my mother will stay in the care home, but to try to make sure she goes on believing in the biscuit story. (87)

The man in “Other –People's –Dreams - Syndrome” fervently believes that the bullet he fires in his dream has killed a boy. Therefore he hands himself over to the police. The police refer him to a hospital that specializes in mental and nervous disorders (120). In “Portions of Jam” the boy's father is shot by an arms- dealer only because he drops a portion of jam on to the floor. “The portion of jam splits open and splatters his foot with sticky apricot jam, so he opens fire” (144). The consequence is that the father is totally incapacitated: can't walk, move his hands or even speak.

War appears to affect the characters largely in two ways. While in some it brings out their and kindness in others it understandably exposes their mental frailties. That the human mind tends to get distorted under these circumstances is an understatement. The kids at school compete with each other to tell stories about how their “fathers beat them” (6). The stories illustrate the power each father has on his household and since war is a power struggle it appears to be important for the kids to depict the patriarch as dominant. The narrator of “A Grasshopper” proudly recounts how his father had beaten him with a leather belt and was no “grasshopper” or coward (9). He even self-mutilates himself to corroborate some of his fabricated stories (9). Further, in his attempt to prove that his father is “someone frightening” (9), the boy decides to buy him a glass eye. The child interprets his father's

deference to the authorities as a cowardly act and looks for a way to make him appear machismo. He even finds a solution for it. He decides to sell the gunmen his twin brother's extra organ (16) and with the money buy his father a glass eye. He even goes ahead and tries to implement it. In all this, he never consults the adults. In fact none of the children in these narratives discusses anything with the adults. It clearly reveals that war has wrecked communication within families and even among families there are no conversations. In these stories we see that children are forced to witness both their parents' humiliation at the hands of their tormentors and their increasing regression to a childlike state. This is a devastating experience for the child and probably the reason why he has no confidence in the adult world. Linda Goldman says "The adult world that children normally look to for security and comfort has become a world of fear, panic and jitteriness" (XX11). The boy watches his father being mercilessly beaten up by gunmen and his father yielding without a fight. So he takes it upon himself to make his father appear strong. The narrative is swamped with abnormal responses to the horrors of war: a father who never cries (24), a little boy who is happy with his newly acquired glass eye because he has a face that frightens people (40), a patriarch who abandons his wife and child only to relocate to another place get married and have kids (37), the father in "Biscuits" who also abandons his family after the war and is not heard of for the next 20 years (88), the mother in "Biscuits" who can no longer make the delicious deserts she had been baking during the war (86), children who casually tell their parents how to conduct their burial (51), a blast victim who wants his son to donate him his arms (62), a young boy who dreams of buying a 6mm pistol which 3 of the boys in the building already possess (10), a couple who keep a blood clot in an aquarium and attempt to raise it as a child (132) , an elderly abattoir worker who insists on dressing as a matador and each day must "choose the largest cow, pounce on it and strangle it with his bare hands" (45) , a pair of lovers Juan and Ausa who enter an uneasy

ménage with a young girl and a bull (161) and a nine year old boy who decides not to smile in his life again and keeps his word to the extent of callously ignoring his mother's dying wish (98). The boy is adamant that he will not smile "My first thought was that if I smiled, an ambulance would come and take me away. This was just a feeling and I couldn't really explain it. I had decided not to smile and that was that." (99). The attitude of these characters is largely negative. Their disparaging thoughts are self-defeating, prevent them from mastering their fears and slowly kill their inner spirit.

Nevertheless, it is significant that despite these travails some of the characters appear to be happy and optimistic. While some adopt this as a survival mechanism, others believe that this is the way forward. The mother in "The Pepper Plant" continues to send her sons to school despite the war (4), even though her husband deserts her, she is happy because at least he is alive (36), father and son share intimate telephonic conversations despite the fact that father has abandoned him (40). Some of the characters are even concerned about others, depicting their innate human benevolence. The boy in the gramophone is willing to do "everything in my power to fulfill my father's wishes" (61). He even agrees to donate his arms (62). Some of the characters strive hard to keep each other and themselves happy. The father gifts his young son a pepper plant and teaches him to "wipe the little budding peppers with a piece of candle and to light the candle over them so they would get vitamins and grow" (4), he also tells him to nurture the plant so that the plant becomes his friend. His father also makes him believe that in every tiny pepper there is a soul that he has to protect. So the boy makes it his mission during the war (4-5). The father realizes that a positive attitude plays a strong in helping people live especially in a war zone. Linda Goldman in *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World* aptly points out the need to enhance young people's ability to cope with and overcome adversity during dramatically challenging times. She says that a positive

difference can be made by identifying and encouraging resilient qualities in children. This can help to create responsible human beings that have the inner strength not just to make it through an uncomfortable event, but also to have the capacity for transforming themselves and their world during difficult times (XIII). Again the mother in “Matador” follows all her brother commands including cooking an elaborate meal for him despite the adverse circumstances (48). Another mother is willing to “spend the rest of my life putting nappies on him, cleaning up his shit, shaving him and putting up with every indignity from him”(63). She serves her bedridden husband for nearly 23 years. The stories also depict the hopeless situation in which some of the characters are caught. Despite that they do not lose their sense of humour.

... I have to clean up my urine, which has soaked my clothes, the toilet seats, the floor, the bed, and the courtyard. Sometimes I slip, and sometimes I wet myself while cleaning up the previous round, while my brother laughs, slapping his forehead with the muscles of his one arm and saying with difficulty, ‘It’s no use, man, no use.’ (94).

The Mother in “The Pepper Plant” fabricates a feel-good narrative about her deaf son to make him more desirable:

Children who have disability, such as deafness, blindness, inability to speak or whatever, have a second heart. God takes one sense from them, but in its place he gives them another heart on the right side of their chests, because there isn’t enough room on the left –hand side (18).

The narratives thus depict the modus operandi that the characters engage in order to help themselves and others to look beyond the trauma and survive.

The narratives also display some brave and intelligent kids who strive hard to adapt to the circumstances. The schoolboy in “The Pepper Plant” is brave enough not only to talk

to the gunmen but even discuss organ trafficking with them (18). After his father abandons the family, the young boy boldly carries on the family laundry business (36). The 16 year old boy in the “Gramophone” is forced to leave school after his father’s accident to fend for the family. He learns the ropes by starting off by being a carpenter’s apprentice and then moves on to partner a furniture factory. He is even willing to donate his arms for his father (61). The instincts of most of the kids are pretty sharp. They discern that the *sahlab* seller is actually a spy (12).

He came to school twice a day. Completely bald, short and chinless, with just a thin moustache, he wore rubbish shoes, which made many of the children avoid buying *sahlab* from him. But apparently he didn’t care. He kept coming to school never saying anything. We never saw him speak. (12)

The stories show how precocious some of the children are. The adverse circumstances force some of them to take the bull by the horn whilst some others cave in without a fight. In his final story in the anthology, Maarouf uses a bull to narrate the story. He has moved to animals as they are an integral part of the planet. “In that town people believe that bulls and people can be brothers and sisters” (160). The bull harps on revenge for the mental agony inflicted on his sister by her lover. This is a significant strategy as nowhere in the narratives do we come across characters who cry for revenge for the atrocities perpetrated on them.

The diverse focalizers in *Jokes for the Gunmen* vividly capture the impact of war on the cognitive domains of the unarmed civilians. Maarouf’s harrowing narratives have the power to shock and numb our senses. They force us to rethink about the extent of evil unleashed during these conflicts and their disastrous repercussions. The characters like most traumatized individuals mask their pain and suffering within a harsh façade and find expression for these traumatic episodes in different ways. Such dramatic events may aid in

dealing with the immediate sense of loss, but in reality, they camouflage a much deeper sense of hurt and hopelessness caused by years of trauma. The family support network is practically non-existent as children and adults are engaged in their own internal battles. The memories are so traumatic that some of the survivors find it extremely difficult to return to normal life. Emphasis needs to be placed on trauma rehabilitation: helping people heal from the pain. The crux of the Maaroufian narratives is that the psychological costs of war are staggering as the resilience of war survivors keeps diminishing. As post-conflict regions try to build economies and infrastructure it is more important that the focus should be on the human element of rebuilding lives and societies. This is because war does not just kill people it makes the lives of the survivors a living hell.

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