

The Significance of Baghdad in Rajiv Joseph's Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

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<p>Received: 20 Dec 2023; Received in revised form: 14 Jan 2024; Accepted: 19 Jan 2024; Available online: 25 Jan 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)</p> <p>Keywords – Baghdad as Symbol, Historical Significance, Urban Conflict, Iraq War, and Resilience.</p>	<p><i>The narrative of Rajiv Joseph's play Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo intricately weaves the city of Baghdad into its fabric. Baghdad becomes a half-character, playing an important part in enhancing our understanding of the play's thematic elements. Set during the Iraq War, the play delves into the intricate interplay of trauma, morality, and the absurdity of conflict. It uses Baghdad as a stage upon which to demonstrate these elements and as a key to unlocking their internal complexities. This paper examines both the historical significance of the city and its portrayal as a decaying urban landscape, as well as how both of these factors intensify the characters' internal conflicts. This paper interprets the battered condition of the city of Baghdad to be an accurate reflection of the emotional and moral state of the characters in the play. This study contends that the play's setting is integral to understanding the play's narrative and characters. It also arms us, as an audience, with heightened engagement to confront the play's existential themes with our sense of humanity in times of perceived unfathomable chaos. Rajiv Joseph depicts the layers of history and the city's psychological toll on its inhabitants, leaving us to question how free we are to make the right choices for the betterment of all.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The capital of Iraq, Baghdad, is a cultural and historical epicenter that has been hit extremely hard since the beginning of the war in 2003. In Rajiv Joseph's play, Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo, Baghdad serves as the backdrop for life's complexities that exist in an urban city in a time of conflict and transcends this role to that of a character that gives even more insight into the thoughts and emotions of actual characters in the play. Scholars and critics can look at the text to a close degree to discover the historical significance of the city in order to enhance one's understanding of the text and understand the ways in which the city helps develop

the actual characters that the play centers around. As the characters in the play, the audience witnesses a decaying sense of emotion and is no longer able to feel anything they once felt before the war started, much like the entire city. In his very short portrayal in the play, Musa shows the resilience and hope one feels when one lives in a city in ruins.

The play upholds the message about the history of war, especially the Iraq War, known for its indiscriminate chaos. The Iraq War contributed a bundle of mixed morals and ethical rigor. As Joseph navigates through the city of Baghdad into the interwoven categories of trauma, the absurdity of warfare, and morality, the city of Baghdad turns into

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a character itself. It goes beyond being stationary; someone and something are at the heart of the play. It served as a dual symbol, representing both the city and the turmoil depicted in the play.

In the play's pages, we confront Iraq's tragedy and the city that founded civilization. Baghdad gives the Bengal Tiger its name and philosophical foundation. This supercharged symbol's meanings are the focus of what follows: its historical connotations, physical harm, and the psychological toxicity to which it subjects the characters. Because this is a text-based analysis, it should become clear throughout this paper how earnestly the characters confront their tragic situations, and how that very confrontation cements the meaning that audiences take from the play. A detailed analysis of the play will reveal the tortured nature of history in Baghdad, the crime and psychological effects of war to which the play's characters fall prey, and why the setting in the play is so vitally important to the character's internal struggles, not to mention our understanding of humanity amidst so much chaos.

II. BAGHDAD AS A SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPE

In the play, Joseph portrays Baghdad's bustling metropolis as both sentimental and hostile. Sparked by war, terrorism, and moral decay, this city serves as powerful imagery in which the characters learn of the decay and resilience of all of humanity against endless war. As an important representation of the history and cultural devastation that swept through the country and left people in anguish that continues even after the war has ceased, the people of Baghdad experience the aftermath of war. Joseph (2012) explores the dehumanizing effects of war, noting, "You see, this is what happens to people in a war. They turn into something else. They lose their humanity" (Act 2, Scene 4). Anderson (2004) states, "Baghdad was transformed into a hellish landscape. The war had torn apart the city's infrastructure, and the streets were filled with the wreckage of the conflict." (Anderson, 2004, p. 124).

III. BAGHDAD'S MULTIFACETED IDENTITY

Joseph's play reveals Baghdad as a robust and all-encompassing character, not just a physical location, Article DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.3.1.6>

but one that is as immense and intricate as the history it retains. This theatricalized landscape plays a crucial role in the story by delving into the intricacies of human experiences. We must fully expose the characteristics of Baghdad to uphold this claim.

Above all else, Joseph artfully expresses the voracity of Baghdad's historical context. The city, in essence, becomes a living and breathing example of the perseverance of ancient civilizations; concurrently, Baghdad evolves as the play progresses in its historical awareness. In fact, Joseph (2012) exemplifies this particular aspect of *The Arabian Nights*: "Baghdad, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have nurtured civilization for millennia, stands as a witness to the ebb and flow of history." (Act 2, Scene 1).

The play's thematic portrayal draws inspiration from the cultural diversity that existed in Baghdad during the tenth century and continues to this day. The play depicts Baghdad as a diverse cultural center where people from different backgrounds interact and contribute to its growth. Baghdad in the play is not a geographical location but rather a microcosm of human experiences. Packer (2005) states, "Baghdad's complexity as a city of diverse populations was evident in its neighborhoods and social interactions, reflecting a long history of ethnic and sectarian coexistence and conflict." (Packer, 2005, p. 202). The play effectively justifies this fact by showcasing the actions and narratives of individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures, as well as their interactions and relationships, thereby illustrating the diversity and lifestyles of these societies.

Baghdad is not only defined by its history and cultural roles; it is also a symbol of resilience, sustained under the distress of the past and the difficulties of the present; assurance by way of trial; and trust in oneself. During all the fighting and all the war, Baghdad became a person, a characterization of a human prototype, as Joseph (2012) reflects: "Baghdad may have witnessed countless trials, but its spirit remains unbroken, a testament to the indomitable human will" (Act 3, Scene 4).

In conclusion, Joseph is a gifted writer. He uses Iraq's symbolic landscape to reveal more than just the story's backdrop. Yes, the land around the characters

in Joseph's play is important; it tells the reader a lot about the characters themselves, but it also represents the rich tapestry of religions, cultures, and histories that make up the heart and soul of Iraq today. The modern Iraqis are overcoming the metaphorical challenges posed by the American army, just as Iraqis had to overcome the literal challenges of the 1991 'dust storm'.

IV. THE URBAN DECAY AND TRANSFORMATION

The cityscape that emerges behind the characters in Joseph's play, set in Baghdad, tells its own story. The degradation of Baghdad's urban environment serves as a parallel metaphor in the play for the characters' decline and eventual self-destruction. The crumbling architecture and the disarrayed streets in Bengal Tiger lead to parallel internal struggles and decay of the characters, making the backdrop a metaphorical narration itself. al-Khalil (2006) states, "The crumbling infrastructure of Baghdad served as a powerful metaphor for the city's broader existential crisis, with every damaged building echoing the fractures in Iraqi society" (al-Khalil, 2006, p. 97).

The physical decay of the city itself, along with how closely the play portrays this reflection, is striking. Desolate buildings, destroyed infrastructure, and streets, ravaged by years of war and neglect, parody the characters and their broken existences. Joseph (2012) in the play states: "The city of Bagdad itself was once a great, shining seat of power. It knew no equal. And now, the once-grand city of Bagdad now stands as a shattered reflection of our own shattered lives" (Act 2, Scene 3). The quote represents the symbolism in a city that now reflects the characters' collapsed lives. Fisk (2005) states, "The city of Baghdad was in ruins. The streets were littered with the debris of war, and the once vibrant heart of Iraq had become a wasteland of destruction and desolation" (Fisk, 2005, p. 690).

Additionally, when one of the characters states, "Amidst the ruins, there is a spirit of renewal, a hope that mirrors our own quest for redemption" (Act 4, Scene 1). The city's disorder and destruction contrast with its resilience and rejuvenation, reflecting the transformation in Baghdad that mirrors the characters' journeys. The image of the degrading cityscape of bricks and concrete turning into a lively

and wondrous civilization becomes a symbol that reflects the characters' ability to fix their damaged spirits and lives.

The urban decay and eventual transformation of the setting within Joseph's play serve almost as another visual metaphor for the change in his characters' psychological and emotional states. As the layers of paint fall from the walls, we also find the layers of his characters' lives flaking. The physical description of the city reminds readers of its tortured people and their ability to persevere and recreate, no matter how terrible the past is.

V. BAGHDAD'S IMPACT ON CHARACTERS

Throughout the play, the impact of living in Baghdad is significant. Baghdad's landscape forces the characters to adapt and confront their own moral dilemmas against a backdrop of unending chaos and violence. Anderson (2004) states, "Baghdad's pervasive violence and destruction shape the lives of its residents, who are constantly forced to navigate the moral ambiguities of their existence amidst the ruins of their city" (Anderson, 2004, p. 137). The city is both literally in ruins and remarkably resilient, reflecting both Baghdad and the journeys of the play's characters. Joseph (2012) reflects on the profound impact of Baghdad's environment on its characters, stating that "Baghdad is a war-torn place, but it's also a place where people try to find meaning and survive despite the chaos" (Act 1, Scene 2).

VI. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF WAR

In Joseph's play, while readers never see Baghdad on stage, it is evident that the effect on the characters is great. Every character, both directly and indirectly, experiences it throughout the entire play. The effect manifests itself in both the 'caged' and the uncaged. The Glamorous Tiger serves to illustrate the impact of war and one's environment. The impact of a single constraint on daily existence can be profound. However, the play also explores the concept of purgatory for individuals liberated from their confines. The play affects not only animals, but also humans. The characters in the play reflect the city itself—broken, haunted, and searching for meaning amid the chaos of war.

The psychological mark the war left has a profound impact on a character like the Bengal Tiger. The tiger explains in the play that he has been mentally scarred by the occurrence, referring to the painful experience by saying, "I used to roam freely in the wild, but now I'm confined to this cage. The war has shattered my sense of freedom and left me feeling trapped." (Act 2, Scene 3). The quote from the Bengal Tiger illustrates how many Baghdad residents suffered not only from mental scars from the war, but also from emotional imprisonment within the city.

Musa, an Iraqi gardener, is another character in this play who exemplifies the psychological effects of the war. Musa states, "I've witnessed so much death and destruction in this city. It's impossible to escape the nightmares that haunt me every night" (Act 1, Scene 2). Musa's lines emphasize how traumatized and war-scarred the people in a city like Baghdad would be.

Not only are the characters in the play immediately affected by the war, but they also struggle to find meaning within the devastation and chaos that accompany the battle. Kev, an American soldier, contemplates in the play the emptiness that consumes him as a result of his experiences in Baghdad: "I thought I was coming here to do something meaningful, but all I see is senseless violence and suffering" (Act 3, Scene 1). When Kev realizes his meaninglessness, the audience sees that the war made both sides question the purpose, value, and damage of their lives, as well as a destroyed city. Finally, Baghdad's significance is key to understanding the play and the characters' psychological and emotional state. Through the characters' experiences and the horrific conclusion of most of them, the psychological impact of war manifests itself in a deranged manner, leaving the characters broken, haunted, and desperate to find meaning amidst the destruction. The play's depiction of the effect on humans is significant enough to shift them away from the internal pain of war.

VII. RESILIENCE AND HOPE IN THE MIDST OF HARDSHIPS

Baghdad, one of Iraq's ancient cities, has experienced many hardships and conflicts, making the people's struggle very difficult. Cockburn (2006) states, "Baghdad, once a symbol of ancient glory, has faced

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relentless turmoil, transforming its vibrant streets into battlegrounds that reflect the broader conflicts plaguing the country" (Cockburn, 2006, p. 42). In *Baghdad Zoo*, the play's character, Musa, who is a local residing in Baghdad, is a praiseworthy symbol of peace and hope. Musa's endeavor to protect the animals in the zoo also projects a symbol of peace and hope for the people of Baghdad. The play's development of Musa's role reveals his dedication to animals and his complete lifelong commitment to their care. In this way, the author portrays Musa as a life protector. Musa states, "I take care of the animals because they are like me. They have suffered, and they need someone who understands their pain." (Act 2, Scene 2).

VIII. MUSA: A SYMBOL OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE

In the play, Musa is portrayed as a caretaker who is committed to keeping the animals even if he dies. He believes that the only thing humans are capable of is destruction. In the play, Musa is an assistant zookeeper ignored by the Americans in a war-ravaged zoo. Determined to care for his animals until they kill him, Musa becomes embroiled in the conflict when an uncannily communicative tiger bites off the hand of an insensitive young American soldier. With his new limb in his mouth, the tiger follows Musa to his tiny home, where he moves in and becomes a real character in the play.

The man who feeds the animals in the zoo exemplifies Musa's point. "The people want bread" (Act 2, Scene 2). From the moment Nadia comes across Musa, she is intrigued by him. Thompson (2019) states, "Rajiv Joseph's *Baghdad Zoo* effectively captures the spirit of resilience through its main character, Musa, who, despite the surrounding turmoil, remains a beacon of hope and sanity in a world turned upside down" (Thompson, 2019, p. 105). Many people try to escape, but Musa, more than anyone else, will not leave. Lehmann (2014) states, "In *Baghdad Zoo*, Rajiv Joseph uses dark humor and a unique narrative style to explore themes of human resilience and the absurdity of conflict. The character of Musa stands out as a symbol of endurance amid the chaos of war" (Lehmann, 2014, p. 93). Musa is determined to stand by his animals until the end, as demonstrated when Margo, an

elephant, gives birth to a baby elephant, despite knowing that the baby elephant would also die.

Many scholars, such as Lehmann and Thompson, focus on the importance of the character of Musa in Baghdad Zoo by Rajiv Joseph as a symbol of hope, resilience, and optimism. Musa is the moral center of the play. He serves as a genuinely compassionate person who can find purpose and meaning in the depths of unimaginable destruction and degradation. Musa has a calm and fighting spirit about himself. He cares about the animals that are under his care. Despite the ongoing war in his country, he remains concerned about the situation in the hospital. When the bombs struck the hospitals, Musa, who was in the hospital, asked Tom for a piece of paper so he could give it to Hakim. Tam cared deeply about Musa's opinion because he is very knowledgeable about and loves animals.

IX. CONCLUSION

In "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo" by Rajiv Joseph, Baghdad isn't just the setting of the play; it's a living, breathing symbolic character representing the complexities of strife, the ravages of war, and an urban life in turmoil. Baghdad is more than a site on a map—rather, it's a melting pot of the city's rich history, peeling decay, and tireless resolve that greatly influence the emotional journey of the play's characters, and it's enveloping the ghostly sites and painful history within.

The play's portrayal of Baghdad focuses on a city that, within a generation of lifetimes, is the richest capital in the world. For almost a thousand years, this was where the sinews of this earth lay. Once the epitome of culture and refinement that guided the world, this city now stands as an exemplar of ignorance, an exemplar of war, and an exemplar of failure. The river will vanish, and the invading armies will have gathered within our diverse city. To choose such a setting is a potent way to investigate the human condition—to say that if our souls survive such a place, we might be in pretty decent shape. The act of establishing the play in Baghdad, endowing the city with a name, a nationality, and a specific era, underscores the remarkable nature of a place that defies categorization as a city, despite its destruction. Even as it passes into the conversation of rubble and bone, or vice versa, even as many bodies conflagrate

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and disintegrate, many private thoughts conflagrate and disintegrate.

In conclusion, "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo" is a masterful example of how a setting can serve as an empathetic anchor, grounding the themes and characters of a play and, in doing so, allowing readers to have a better understanding of the human experience amidst the bleakest of subject matter. Joseph's Baghdad is a microcosm of a city that has become a lightning rod for the world's attention in recent years, as it once did in ancient times. It is a place with a rich history of memorials and relics. The script underscores, overtly and subtly, the weighted importance of place—that places hold the histories that both people and things must bear witness to, whether they want to or not. Even objects can feel a deep sense of place in the world. In any given context, human beings are always the final arbitrators, the definers of their historical meaning. By the end, Joseph demonstrates the extent to which a place serves as a narrative collaborator or even the central theme of a play, transporting audiences from struggling, wild Baghdad to various historical and emotional contexts.

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