

## **Narrative Deviations: The Role of the Unnatural Narrator in James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* (2015)**

**Ashraf Taha Mohamed Kouta**

Associate professor of English literature (Novel)

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Damietta University, Egypt

[ashrafkouta@du.edu.eg](mailto:ashrafkouta@du.edu.eg)

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### **Abstract**

Based on the critical concepts of unnatural narrative theory, this paper investigates narrative deviations and their functions in James Hannaham's novel *Delicious Foods* (2015). According to unnatural narrative theorists, aspects of unnaturalness in realistic fiction can be traced in four elements: narrators, characters, time, and space. Unnatural scenarios in a narrative can be interpreted through certain reading strategies. More specifically, this paper focuses on investigating the aspects and roles of the unnatural narrator in Hannaham's narrative which has several third-person and first-person narrators. The most fascinating among those narrators is an unnatural object-narrator, namely cocaine, which narrates almost half of the novel. Although cocaine is an inanimate object, it is both first-person narrator and focalizer in the narrative. Moreover, though a first-person narrator naturally does not have access to other characters' thoughts and other places, cocaine can easily seep into the minds of characters and move freely among locations. Applying the reading strategies of unnatural narrative theory, the current paper interprets the meaning and function of these narrative deviations, showing how they are eventually conventionalized by blending cognitive frames.

**Keywords:** Unnatural narrative theory; unnatural narrator; James Hannaham; *Delicious Foods*; crack cocaine; human trafficking.

Set during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, but written during the 21st century's opioid epidemic, Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* portrays a divided America grappling with addiction and various forms of human trafficking. The present paper analyzes *Delicious Foods* from an unnatural narrative perspective, a recent development in narrative theory, which foregrounds narrative impossibilities and deviations. As the paper demonstrates, the unnatural narrative voice of the novel effectively captures the anomalies and atrocities overwhelming not only postmodern America but also the world at large.

A natural narrative is one that imitates the real world as we know it; it introduces people, events, and settings that resemble those of the real world. Narrative theorists have always focused on the mimetic aspects of fiction, paying no or little attention to those parts of the narrative that cannot be actualized. Throughout history, literary works have often featured unnatural elements. This can be observed in ancient Greek works by authors like Ovid and Sophocles, medieval and Middle Eastern tales like *One Thousand and One Nights*, 18th and 19th century Gothic novels and children's literature such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk: A Romance* (1796) and Marshall Saunders's *Beautiful Joe: An Autobiography* (1893), and finally postmodern literature which is the main focus of this paper. Unnaturalness in literature, then, is not a new phenomenon; yet, it was only during the last two decades that unnatural aspects in literature have been theorized and given critical attention. Emphasizing the need for a new theory of unnatural narrative, Jan Alber states that although many works of fiction have aspects of unnaturalness, narrative theory has not yet addressed instances of unnaturalness or how readers can reconcile them to cognitive frames. ("Impossible Storyworlds" 79). While narrative theory traditionally focuses on the mimesis of real-life situations, unnatural narrative theory subverts this tradition, focusing instead on analyzing the anti-mimetic aspects of narrative. Unnatural narrative theorists, however, do not analyze these elements of unnaturalness for their own sake. Rather, they attempt to interpret them within acceptable cognitive frames as a representation of real-life phenomena. As Lars Bernaerts et al put it, "readers are invited to reflect upon aspects of human life when reading the fictional life stories of non-human narrators." (68)

Meeting at the International Conference on Narrative held in Washington, DC in 2007, a group of narrative theorists agreed that those long-ignored anti-mimetic parts of the narrative should be studied on a systematic critical basis.

The group claimed that the conference demonstrated a “strong resistance to otherwise predominant naturalizing paradigms” (Nielsen 55). The meeting ushered in a theory of unnatural narrative that began to take shape in 2010 when the four precursors of unnatural narrative theory, namely Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Stefan Iversen, and Brian Richardson, published an article in which they introduced different definitions of unnatural narrative. The four authors, who would later come to be called the unnaturalists, state that they have provided the theoretical basis for unnatural narratology as well as the goals of that program (Alber et al. 129). From the very beginning, it seemed that unnatural narrative theory would not be a unified theory. In their introduction to *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges* (2020), which they also edited, Alber and Richardson state that unnatural narratology was never a uniform movement where all the researchers followed the same approach, and it never aimed to be a strictly unified methodology (2). However, all unnatural narrative theorists agree upon and seek to emphasize the assumption that strange narratives challenge our traditional understanding of narrative and that these impossible narratives have their own functions within realistic fiction (Alber et al. 115). Since there are different definitions and ideas of unnatural narrative, the current study limits itself to the critical views proposed by Alber, as the major voice among the unnaturalists, as well as those views aligning with him.

In a series of articles and books as both author and editor, Alber endeavors to establish the foundations of unnatural narrative theory. He defines unnatural narratives as literary texts that present impossible scenarios that initially hinder the process of understanding (*Unnatural Narrative* 45). Alber and Richardson also define unnatural narrative as a recent perspective in narrative theory that is mainly concerned with anti-mimetic texts and methods, thus tracing impossible and unrealistic aspects of fictional storytelling (1). In earlier studies, Alber defines these impossible aspects that would identify a narrative as unnatural. Relying on Richardson's earlier discussion of extreme narration in postmodern literature (2006), Alber argues that the unnatural encompasses events and scenarios that are both physically and logically impossible (“Impossible Storyworlds” 80). In *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016), Alber expands his early definition of unnatural narrative allowing it to include “humanly impossible scenarios” in addition to those scenarios which are logically and physically impossible (14). Some of these impossibilities which are found in postmodern fiction and go

beyond human, physical, and logical boundaries are object narrators, dead narrators, fetus narrators, characters with different versions, characters that are alive as well as dead, transforming figures, retrogressive timelines, places changing their shapes, and using a carpet, a grave, or a womb as the setting of a narrative.

It should be noted that for a work of fiction to be critiqued for being unnatural, it should be based on real life. Unnatural narrative theorists do not analyze fairy tales, for instance, because “they make no pretensions to realism” (Alber and Richardson, “Introduction” 4-5). This means that the unnaturalists are interested in elements of unnaturalness in realistic fiction insofar as they tell us something about the real world. The goal of the unnaturalists is to prove that the unnatural is not completely separated from the natural. For Alber, all instances of unnaturalness can be interpreted as reflecting real people and the world in which they live (*Unnatural Narrative* 36). In general, the four precursors of unnatural narrative theory agree on the basic assumption that unnaturalness in realistic fiction has meaning and purpose. A writer’s act of incorporating one or more aspects of unnaturalness in his/her narrative is certainly an intentional act (45-46). Consequently, these unnatural elements within a realistic piece of writing serve a certain function. This leads to a discussion of the various areas of unnaturalness and their roles within the narrative.

Unnaturalness can be traced in four elements within narratives: the narrator, characters, time, and space. The unnaturalists argue that several narratives “may radically deconstruct the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, and the minds associated with them, or they may move beyond real-world notions of time and space” (Alber et al. 114). Since the current paper is limited to analyzing the aspects and roles of the unnatural narrator, other elements of unnaturalness are not theorized here. Narrators are said to be unnatural if they assume more roles or potentials than they are supposed to have. The first-person narrator, for instance, is usually limited to certain boundaries of time, place, and knowledge; he/she can narrate only what he/she knows and cannot narrate events that happen simultaneously in other places. The narrator in homodiegetic narration is usually subject to these restrictions. There are many cases in postmodern fiction, however, in which narratives violate natural cognitive limits and give the first-person narrator unnatural abilities needed to comprehend others’ thoughts (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 81). An example is Saleem Sinai, the main character and first-person

narrator of Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). With his telepathic powers, Saleem can read other people's minds. He also has an unnatural sense of smell which makes him able to find other midnight's children and arrange a conference for them. Other unnatural character-narrators include a fetus in Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016), two twin fetuses in Micah Perks's *What Becomes Us* (2016), a five-year-old child born and raised in a single room where he and his mother are held captive in Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010), and a baby born without a brain in Jenny Diski's *Like Mother* (1988). Dead narrators are also found in several postmodern narratives such as Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998), Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), and several short stories in Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and other Stories of Iraq* (2013). The use of inanimate objects as narrators is also traced in postmodern fiction. These include a 6000-year-old ceramic bowl in Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector* (1997), an insect in Rebecca Miller's *Jacob's Folly* (2013), and a coin and the color red in *My Name is Red*.

To interpret the meaning and significance of unnatural narrators in mimetic narratives, Alber suggests certain reading strategies. These strategies attempt to account for a writer's use of anti-mimetic narrative aspects in a piece of writing about real life. The first reading strategy, which is also a prerequisite for interpreting any narrative with unnatural features, is the blending of frames. In the fictional world, we are sometimes faced with impossible scenarios that involve anti-mimetic narrators, characters, space, or time. To deal with such texts, readers need to blend frames, namely to combine their own knowledge of the actual world with this new unnatural phenomenon in the narrative, generating a new frame that helps them to accept the unnatural and read the text with this new frame in mind (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 47). For example, a reader's prior knowledge of the daily terror in Iraq helps him/her to accept and familiarize the unnatural narrators in Blasim's short stories. In "The Truck to Berlin," for instance, an Iraqi man turns into a fierce wolf that not only kills all of the characters in the story, but also consumes their blood, and even feasts on their flesh. The daily terror and atrocities in Iraq are also dramatized in Blasim's "The Virgin and the Soldier" and "The Hole" in which unnatural narrators and characters devour the corpses of other fellow human beings. Being aware of the impossible living conditions in contemporary Iraq, the reader can accept these narrative impossibilities in Blasim's short stories. Having come to terms with the impossible scenario, the reader may move to another reading strategy to interpret the meaning of these impossibilities.



Since we are dealing with the unnatural within realistic fiction, these impossibilities should be interpreted in the light of socio-political, historical, cultural, and economic forces. According to Bernaerts et al, the conventions that define literature as a social and cultural practice can make non-human narrators seem normal and unsurprising to those familiar with these conventions (88). Having in mind that all works of fiction inevitably have themes, Alber suggests a reading strategy which he calls “foregrounding the thematic” which, together with the first strategy of blending frames, plays a significant role in all of his interpretations (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 213). We can naturalize the unnatural through dealing with it as a way of supporting the themes of the narrative. For example, in Blasim’s short stories mentioned above the unnatural narrators and characters can be read as representative of these thematic reflections, emphasizing the lack of human rights and the spread of violence and terrorism in Iraq. For Alber, instances of unnaturalness become more understandable when viewed from a thematic perspective (51). Bernaerts et al also ascertain that it-narratives with nonhuman narrators can contribute to “casting new light on our conventions and values” (88). Thus, even if some narrative aspects are impossible, they can be accepted and actualized when seen as representative of issues and phenomena occurring in the real world.

Reading allegorically is a third reading strategy suggested by Alber to interpret unnatural aspects in the narrative. According to unnatural narrative theory, unnatural elements can be seen as allegories. That is, beyond their surface meaning and impossible scenarios, unnatural narratives represent human conditions as a whole (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 52). An example is Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) which Alber reads as “an allegory on the objectification of women in the globalized world” (136). In allegory, abstract concepts such as honesty, love, or death can be represented as characters. A postmodern example is Yann Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil* (2011); with its animal characters, Martel’s novel is an allegory of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), with its unnatural setting, namely a moving house that takes different shapes and contains an endless labyrinth, is an allegory of the emptiness, disintegration, and absurdity of human relations as well as the importance of love as a solution for this dilemma (189-90). Thus, following Alber, one can resort to allegory to help explain unnatural or impossible scenarios in realistic fiction.

Although there are more reading strategies suggested by Alber, he states that the three strategies of blending cognitive frames and reading the narrative

thematically and allegorically are the most pivotal. In general, any reading strategy used to interpret elements of unnaturalness in narratives should take into consideration that, since these anti-mimetic features are embedded in realistic fiction, they must have some functions related to this realistic aspect of the narrative. It should be noted that a single aspect of unnaturalness in a narrative can be variously interpreted using different reading strategies which may sometimes intersect in real interpretations (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 55). A critic may, for instance, read the text thematically, while another critic may read the same text allegorically. Furthermore, a critic may read a single text both thematically and allegorically. This approach of blending more than one reading strategy to the analysis of a work of fiction is employed in the present paper.

Critical studies on Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* are still very few. Since its publication in 2015, the novel has been the subject of several reviews and few articles that, in the whole, tackle the novel from a single angle, namely aspects of racism in America. For example, Patricia Stuelke's "Reparative Reading and the Drug Wars' Queer Children" (2022) and Eve Dunbar's "Genres of Enslavement: Ruptured Temporalities of Black Unfreedom and the Resurfacing Plantation" (2022) consider *Delicious Foods* a novel about the rebirth of slavery, anti-Black racism, and anti-Black violence. These articles demonstrate that the wars on drug epidemics, starting with the Reagan era and continued until the Trump administration, expose blatant racism prevailing in the US and reflect how America is still racially divided. In "James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*: Folklore, Displacement, and Resistance" (2020), Shelley Ingram focuses on Hannaham's incorporation of folklore culture to expose racial oppression as well as ways of survival in the American South. The article also demonstrates how capitalist America is based on forced labor. Apart from the perspective of racism, critical studies have almost ignored the novel, though it clearly invites studies from feminist, eco-feminist, ecocritical, psychoanalytic, narratological, and postcolonial perspectives. The present paper analyzes *Delicious Foods* from an unnatural narrative perspective, hoping to add a new reading angle to the extant few studies on the novel.

Set in both Louisiana and Texas during the 1980s and 1990s with external analepsis to the 1970s, Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* tells the story of an African American family torn apart first because of racial violence, and later by addiction, prostitution, and other forms of exploitation. The novel is about the physical and emotional suffering of Darlene and her son, Eddie. After eleven years of stable marriage in Louisiana, Darlene's husband, Nat, is killed and his

store is robbed by a group of racist young men. Unable to cope up with the loss of her husband, Darlene turns to crack addiction. When she runs short of money, she leaves her eleven-year-old son alone and works as a prostitute to be able to buy cocaine. She is eventually lured with false promises of a good job, good salary, and plenty of cocaine to work on a farm owned by a company called Delicious Foods. It turns out, however, that the place has extremely inhuman working conditions. Like Darlene, all of the workers on the farm are drug addicts. Searching for his mother, Eddie ends up reunited with her on the farm. The novel describes the atrocities of the farm which are reminiscent of antebellum American slavery. Eddie's attempt to run away with his mother and other farm workers result in losing his hands and becoming disabled for life. The narrative structure of the novel does not present these events in chronological order. It seems that the author first wrote the novel in chronological order, then he shuffled the chapters so that no chapter remains in its right place. The result is a highly confusing and problematic nonlinear narrative structure which is full of flashbacks and flashforwards.

Hannaham's complex narrative is based on the incorporation of two first-person narrators and several unnamed extradiegetic third-person narrators. Of these narrators, the most fascinating is an impossible first-person object narrator, namely cocaine, known throughout the novel with the name Scotty. This is the first of a series of narrative impossibilities facing the reader in Hannaham's narrative. Hannaham prefers to tell a realistic story in a highly unconventional way in which a great part of the narrative "emanate[s] not from a person but from an anthropomorphized drug" (Gay). The object narrator in Hannaham's novel has all the aspects of the unnatural narrator stated by Alber and other unnatural narrative theorists. For one thing, a talking object is an anomaly "that challenge[s] our real-world knowledge" (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 3). Our cognitive frames and prior knowledge of the real world tell us that objects cannot speak. According to frame theory, we resort to our cognitive frames to answer questions and interpret narrative situations and events (Jahn 442). Although *Delicious Foods* is a realistic text about daily life and problems in America, half of the text is narrated by crack cocaine: "Hello, Darlene, I said, and my smoke entered her lungs for the first time, gentle like a handshake at the start, then my lovely fingers of smoke got in her breath [...] I am so glad we met" (*Delicious Foods* 205). The object narrator here violates and disregards the cognitive frameworks and patterns related to natural laws, logical rules, and typical limitations of human ability and knowledge (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative*



3). Scotty is also a focalizer; it comments on events and other characters' actions and gives its own opinion. Scotty states the reason why Darlene is going to turn to drugs, particularly cocaine. From its own point of view, Scotty believes that Darlene, who suffers from the trauma of losing her husband, becomes psychologically better once she is used to smoking cocaine "I had gave [sic] her the first confidence she felt in years." (*Delicious Foods* 205)

Not only does Hannaham use a first-person object narrator with obvious focalization, but he also allows this narrator to trespass the traditionally recognized limitations of first-person narrators. Like Saleem in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Scotty has certain telepathic powers that allow it to know what other characters feel and think. Narrative theorists agree that homodiegetic narrators are supposed to be restricted by human limitations; they cannot, for instance, read other people's minds (Alber, *Unnatural Narrative* 80; Cohn 790). In Hannaham's narrative, Scotty is an impossible first-person narrator; it violates the categorical boundaries of first-person narration not only because it is an inanimate object, but also because it can perceive what is going on in people's minds. Early in the novel, Scotty tells us that it "penetrated the inner sanctum of her [Darlene's] brain" and had access to her thoughts and feelings (*Delicious Foods* 25). Like an omniscient narrator, Scotty gets into Darlene's mind and narrates how she feels and what she thinks when a man calls her 'lazy' meaning to degrade her as an African American woman, though she is a university graduate (25). Wandering the streets as a prostitute, Darlene sees a kid sitting beside his father in the car. Scotty sees into her mind and narrates how the kid's shirt evokes her memories of her own childhood (28). Throughout the narrative, Scotty sticks to Darlene, seeps into her mind, and narrates how she feels, thinks, and responds to situations facing her. Scotty has access to other characters' minds, as well. It delineates the psychological makeup of Jackie, the assistant of the farm's owner, Sextus, and the recruiter of workers. During the mutiny of the farm workers and Darlene's attempt to kill Sextus, Jackie withdraws quickly to rescue herself. Scotty here analyzes her inner thoughts and interprets her egotistic attitude. As a telepathic narrator that knows more than a natural first-person narrator does, Scotty reads Jackie's thoughts and translates them into words: "I heard her say to herself that if Sextus and How died, she could just move on to a new farm, and if they made it she could tell em she flipped out and went to get help." (314)

Another aspect of narrative unnaturalness is that the it-narrator in Hannaham's narrative transcends the temporal boundaries of first-person

narrators. It is noticed that Scotty has access to Darlene's past; it knows about her traumatic memories and the murder of her husband. Scotty narrates how Darlene is haunted by the sound of her dead husband and how it, Scotty, needs to do something about it before it drives her insane (*Delicious Foods* 25-26). Scotty uses flashback to narrate events that happened to Darlene even before it gets acquainted with her. In chapter 13, for instance, Scotty narrates the events that followed Nat's murder, the mock trial of Nat's murderers, Darlene's search for a job, and her psychological trauma. Scotty is even able to analyze what is going on in Darlene's mind even before she becomes a crack addict; Scotty knows that Darlene was hesitant to use crack cocaine: "In the back of her mind, she thought I was dangerous" (205). This clearly shows that Scotty, apart from being a talking object, can narrate past events that it did not witness. This is in itself a narrative impossibility insofar as first-person narration is concerned. Scotty here is endowed with the same aspects of third-person omniscient narrators.

Spatially, too, Scotty performs another impossible narrative function by narrating events taking place in other locations where it is absent. In chapter 21, for instance, the author allows Scotty, rather than the third-person unnamed narrator, to narrate some events taking place outside the farm. Earlier in the novel, Sirius, one of the workers at Delicious Farm, manages to escape. Scotty has access to Sirius's life events outside the farm; it tells us that after Sirius ran away, he moved to Boston where he became a successful rapper, performing rap music about social justice (*Delicious Foods* 283). Several years later, Sirius sends two newspaper writers to trace the working conditions on the farm, paving the way for helping his fellow workers to escape. Scotty narrates what happens when the two writers have left the farm; they have gone back to Boston and informed Sirius of what they found on the farm (283-89). It is unnatural that a first-person narrator transcends spatial boundaries and informs the reader of events taking place in locations where he/she is not present.

The incorporation of these unnatural aspects of narration into a piece of realistic fiction inevitably has a certain purpose related to the nature of the narrative. Applying Alber's reading strategies, the role of the unnatural narrator in Hannaham's novel can be interpreted. To be able to approach the narrative and get meaning out of it, the reader needs to combine his/her prior knowledge of the world with the impossible world of the talking object as a first step towards interpreting the text. Here comes the first reading strategy suggested by Alber, namely blending frames. The reader can build on his/her own knowledge

of the problems in America during the 1980s and 1990s in which the novel is set. The reader then attempts to blend this real-world knowledge with the unnatural counterpart in the novel, namely the use of cocaine as a first-person character-narrator, which is outside well-known cognitive frames. From the outset, readers need to accept the blending of their prior knowledge about cocaine epidemic, addiction, prostitution, and exploitation of farm workers in America on the one hand, and the acceptance of cocaine as a narrator, on the other hand. It is then that the reader can come up with a new cognitive frame in the light of which the narrative can be interpreted.

*Delicious Foods* is set in an era which witnessed the spread of drug addiction in general and cocaine addiction in particular in America. The addiction of cocaine, or what came to be called crack, became a national predicament known as the crack epidemic during the late 1980s and 1990s. According to David Farber, crack cocaine was particularly spread among poor black people; however, politicians did not give as much attention to the crack epidemic as they would later give to the opioid epidemic which has been plaguing America in general and white communities in particular since the 2000s (2-4). For Farber, the major reasons for the crack crisis were the spread of poverty and unemployment due to racial practices which guaranteed the inferiority of African Americans (5-6). Left without jobs or hopes for a better future, poor African Americans resorted to crack cocaine as their source of income as well as of solace in an unwelcoming America (6). Owing to the unwillingness of policymakers to combat the spread of crack addiction in poor communities, the crack epidemic became a national crisis involving racial unfairness and oppression (4). The crack crisis produced tragic outcomes especially among poor black people. Some of these outcomes are the growing death rates due to crack use or crack sales, resulting in an increase in the number of children in foster care, the spread of weapon use linked to crack sales, and the increase of homicide rate among black teenagers (5). In *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (1994), Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell critically analyzed 270 television news stories covering crack addiction and broadcast during the 1980s. In this study, the authors documented stories conveyed by experts about addicts who exchanged infants for cocaine, businessmen who admitted to swapping wives for the drug, a nurse who confessed to having sex for cocaine, and many others who ruined their families due to crack addiction (123). Cocaine addiction was so overwhelming and widespread that in 1984 the CBS broadcasting called cocaine

“an underground epidemic” (126). The spread of crack houses, which came to replace coffeehouses at that time, led many Americans to consider American culture “a drug culture” (133). Reeves and Campbell give a terrible description of the crack house of the 1980s and how it is closely connected to political and economic corruption: “In the crack house setting, we see the despair, the exploitation, and the perversity of capitalism writ large: consumerism over the edge; the callous marketing of death; the filth and waste of greed.” (133)

Searching for the happiness and excitement promised by crack use and seeking to forget unbearable socioeconomic and racial conditions, many poor people, primarily African Americans, got entangled in different forms of human trafficking. In Article 3 of the 2000 Palermo Protocol, issued by the United Nations, Human trafficking is defined as

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (42)

The Protocol enumerates several forms of exploitation that can be considered forms of human trafficking. Some of these forms are prostitution, forced labor, slavery or slavery-like practices, and child labor (42 – 43). These kinds of human trafficking are discussed in Hannaham's novel. Vulnerability is also a key element in the definition of human trafficking. Vulnerability refers to intrinsic, environmental, and situational factors that raise the likelihood of an individual or group being subjected to trafficking. (Gallagher and McAdam 186)

Based on the above description of trafficking in persons, it is obvious that the postmodern world is teeming with different forms of human trafficking. The United Nations' adoption of the 2000 Palermo Protocol indicates that human trafficking has become a widespread issue. The exploitation of adults and children in forced labor, domestic servitude, prostitution, forced begging, and forced marriage has become so pervasive that it is “often described as modern-day slavery” (Clark and Shone xxiii). A study conducted by the USA State Department concluded that 14,500 to 17,500 persons, both foreigners and native-born Americans, are trafficked in the USA every year (Bales and Soodalter 6). It is terrible that human trafficking is now a profitable business throughout the world as well as in America. In this business, people are commodified as a source of money, as it involves millions of dollars obtained by

ruthless criminals who target the most helpless: those in dire need, the poorly educated, and underprivileged immigrants seeking improvement (6-7). Given the fact that a huge number of persons are trafficked in America each year, it is obvious that human trafficking, or modern-day slavery, is flourishing and more prosperous than it was in Antebellum America. According to Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, ninety American cities had documented cases of slavery in the period from 1999 to 2004 (14). In particular, prostitution and exploitation of farm workers are two enslaving forces in America. The federal government admitted that prostitution represents “the largest market for slave labor in America” (11). The victims of prostitution, who represent almost half of all the victims of human trafficking in America, come to experience physical and psychological problems, including diseases like HIV (12). Bales and Soodalter also document many stories of real farm workers whose cases of forced labor, coercion, and exploitation have been discovered and investigated. Lured to work in the field of agriculture with good salaries and good working conditions, many farm workers, especially immigrants, found themselves practically enslaved owing to forced labor, inhuman living conditions, and movement restrictions. (47-50)

Having gained a deeper understanding of the actual issues of addiction and human trafficking in America, and having overcome the shock resulting from the seemingly unnatural events that really happened and are happening in America, readers can now come to terms with the narrative impossibilities of Hannaham's novel, particularly the unnatural narrator, crack cocaine. Readers can now come up with a new cognitive frame in which the narrative impossibilities of the text are conventionalized. *Delicious Foods* is not a fairy tale with supernatural elements. Rather, it is a very realistic text about the predicament of crack epidemic and different forms of human trafficking. Incorporating an unnatural narrator in a realistic work of fiction turns out to have a pivotal purpose commensurate with this realistic nature of the literary work. Explaining how he came up with the idea of having cocaine as a narrator and focalizer in the novel, Hannaham states that “[i]t came about rather naturally for something that seemed so odd” (“If Drugs”). Hence, an element of unnaturalness in realistic fiction is meant to deliver a message more realistically blatant than realistic fiction itself. The unnatural narrator can now be convincingly read for its thematic significance.

Using Alber's reading strategy of foregrounding the thematic, the reader can grasp the representational function of cocaine in the narrative. Thematically



speaking, Hannaham's novel highlights the drug epidemic and its negative impact. For Alber, the use of multiple narrative voices talking to the main character about his/her emotions and thoughts has a thematic function (*Unnatural Narrative* 87). By presenting cocaine as a first-person narrator with telepathic powers that can read and direct Darlene's thoughts, Hannaham's novel invites the reader to be critical of those forces that attempt to control our thoughts, actions, and feelings. Throughout the novel, Scotty has omniscient qualities that enable it to trespass the limitations of the first-person narration. This 'narrative' trespassing serves well the purpose of showing how drugs seep into one's physical, social, and psychological makeup. Although Darlene's acquaintance with Scotty is supposed to chronologically take place after chapter four, following the murder of her husband, the author opts to introduce these events in chapter one in order to emphasize the thematic significance of Scotty. To foreground the spread of cocaine and how it comes to be part and parcel of people's lives, Scotty is allowed to speak directly to the reader using you-narration to engage the reader and to dominate not only the storyworld but also the world of the narratee. Scotty attempts to endear itself to narratees, telling them directly that it has a lot of friends: "I got *millions*" (*Delicious Foods* 24). Scotty here is introduced as a friend, not an enemy that ruins people's lives: "Yours Truly, Scotty. I'm the only one who stuck by her [Darlene] the whole time" (24). According to Stuelke, the relationship between addicts and crack cocaine in the novel is "a site of queer intimacy" as Scotty is presented as "a self-described friend and lover" (77). Scotty is depicted as the only one that stands beside those in agony. Haunted by the traumatic memories of her husband's murder, Darlene finds solace in cocaine addiction. Scotty tells the reader that its relationship with people is based on love, not coercion (*Delicious Foods* 24). The unnatural narrator even offers the reader success tips; it advises the reader to have positive thoughts in order to make money and form good relationships (26). The narrative here endows upon Scotty a sort of intimacy and dearness to show how it becomes pivotal in people's life. This is a brilliant way of representing the drug epidemic in America.

Addiction even leads to prostitution as one form of human trafficking emphasized in Hannaham's narrative. Darlene's experience as a prostitute is all narrated by Scotty, an indication of the close link between addiction and prostitution. Darlene resorts to prostitution only to get money to buy cocaine as her only comfort in the face of the trauma of her husband's murder. Thus, drugs are a major impetus to the spread of prostitution as a form of human trafficking.

Scotty tells us: “*Upon this rock, I shall build my strip mall*” (*Delicious Foods* 24). Scotty’s statement here is taken directly from Jesus Christ’s declaration “upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18, quoted in Madden 19). Whereas Christ was to establish his church upon solid principles of morality, prostitution is to be based on drugs. The word rock as used by Scotty refers to crack cocaine. The contrast between the two contexts is extremely flagrant and highlights the quagmire modern America comes to descend to. Using a religious allusion in this context of addiction and prostitution shows the extent to which drugs have seeped into people’s lives. It is horrible that addiction and prostitution here are normalized as a main foundation of culture in the same vein as religion, traditions, and ethics. According to Reeves and Campbell, cocaine addiction causes “losing control over middle-class or mediating norms, particularly family and religion” (123). Scotty encourages Darlene to work as a prostitute and offers her tips of success; it advises her to wear tight and short clothes in order to secure “more traffic than just some tawdry johns” (*Delicious Foods* 26). When Darlene fails to persuade a man to be her client and give her forty dollars, Scotty grows angry at her (34). Although Darlene is harshly beaten by the man, losing two of her teeth, Scotty encourages her not to go home until she finds a client so that she may buy cocaine. In the following dialogical exchange between cocaine and Darlene, Hannaham is able to dramatize the essential role played by cocaine addiction in the spread of trafficking in persons:

I made myself hoarse yelling inside her head. I called her a bazillion nasty insults I can’t even repeat here. I went, You don’t really want to be with me! You don’t love me! I cried—she made me weep. Scotty! she screamed. Please, stop! Just tell me how can I get the money now. Scotty! I *do* love you, and I will do anything for you. I pointed her face at the road. Get out there! I said. (34)

Darlene becomes so entangled with cocaine addiction that she resists any attempts of her son Eddie to persuade her to give up using cocaine. (87)

Cocaine addiction further leads to exploitation in the labor market as a major type of human trafficking. The novel highlights the spread of forced labor and child labor especially in the field of agriculture. Hannaham’s novel is based on a real story of human trafficking taking place in 2010 involving the recruitment of LeRoy Smith, a crack cocaine addict who was lured to work in Bulls Hit Farms in Florida. According to Smith’s own story, which was published in Tampa Bay Times, the farm’s practices amounted to human

trafficking: “Slavery. Abuse. Overwork. Deplorable, unsanitary conditions. Drugs” (Montgomery). In an interview conducted by Audrey Hawkes, Hannaham shows how the cycle of forced labor starts in reality. He argues that there have been numerous instances of contemporary slavery involving corrupt farms utilizing vans to lure people from cities to remote locations and enslave or exploit them through indentured servitude, sometimes compensating with drugs (“Human Story”). While wandering the streets as a prostitute, searching for a client, Darlene meets a woman called Jackie near a minibus. It turns out that Jackie is recruiting farm workers. She offers Darlene a job at Delicious Farm where she would pick vegetables and fruits. Scotty uses indirect discourse to narrate how Jackie persuades Darlene to work on the farm by enumerating the wonderful benefits there: “Jackie said, Three-star accommodations. She said, *Olympic-size swimming pool*. Said, *Recreation activities*. *Competitive salary*. *Vacation*” (*Delicious Foods* 67). Yet, Darlene and the other workers accept the job because the company allows them to have as much cocaine as they desire. Darlene notices that the people inside the minibus are using crack pipes, and Scotty approves those addicts and pushes Darlene to engage with them. Once she gets into the minibus and shares crack cocaine with the other passengers, Darlene feels very high, and Scotty seeps into her mind and narrates to us how a crack addict sees the world while being under the influence of drugs:

Drugs’s *good!* She said it with extra o’s. But not just! she said. Everything in this country that they tell you is bad? It’s *good!* She counted on her fingers. Sex is good, fast food is good, niggers are good, dancing’s good, and you *know* alcohol’s fantastic. (72)

Delicious Farm, however, turns out to be a brutal place with inhuman work conditions. It is there that workers become victims of human trafficking; they are enslaved by both forced labor and cocaine addiction. For example, contrary to the three-star accommodation promised by Jackie, the new workers come to share a house with chickens. Further, all the workers are kept in one bedroom with filthy and uncomfortable beds (*Delicious Foods* 98-102). In addition, workers have no freedom of movement; although they have been told that they are entitled to regular vacations, it turns out that they cannot leave the farm at all. During her early days on the farm, Darlene attempts to wander away from the chicken house where workers are kept. Suddenly, a man calls at her fiercely, points a gun at her, and orders her to get into the chicken house. The man further tells her that they are going to dock her pay ten dollars (109). Thus, Hannaham questions the persistent and constant use of coercion, confinement,

and other forms of forced labor in capitalist America as major aspects of trafficking in persons (Ingram 22). It is ironical that the workers are required to pay for their beds and utilities more than they actually receive from the company. (*Delicious Foods* 139). In addition to being kept in rooms full of rats and other insects, Sirius enumerates several grievances befalling him and other workers on the farm such as long hours of strenuous labor in scorching weather, low pay, and limited mobility. (142)

Child labor is another issue discussed in Hannaham's novel as a manifestation of trafficking in persons. Child labor is defined as "hard tasks that should not be undertaken by minors" (Aba 342). Moreover, those who are less than 16 or 18 years old should not be exposed to hazardous work conditions such as long working hours high work load, and unsafe working environment (343). Eddie is recruited by Jackie to work on Delicious Farm although he is still twelve years old. Eddie is even assigned to do the same jobs done by other adult and skillful workers. He is forced to do hard work that always keeps him "low to the ground" (*Delicious Foods* 210). Furthermore, Eddie is punished severely by How and Jackie. In an attempt to run away, he even loses his hands and becomes disabled for life.

Thematically, too, the novel dramatizes the role of drug addiction in the spread of human trafficking. Despite all the atrocities of Delicious Farm discussed above, Darlene opts to stay on the farm where she can use cocaine whenever she desires without any legal consequences. In Hannaham's own words, cocaine addiction "was really a way of keeping Darlene on the farm" ("If Drugs"). Scotty states that it convinces Darlene of the importance of staying on the farm. For example, when Darlene feels worried about her son and thinks of escaping running away like her fellow worker Sirius, Scotty says to her: "Darlene, look how much positivity you brought to yourself, chile. Stop worrying about that stupid kid and come party with me" (*Delicious Foods* 104). The influence of cocaine on Darlene's decisions is visualized in the form of narration: "I smiled at Darlene inside her brain. I knew what she gon [sic] do" (106). Whenever Darlene is punished or humiliated by How, she resorts to crack cocaine, and Scotty is ready to provide her with the psychological support she needs to forget her troubles and accept being humiliated and enslaved. It turns out that the company uses cocaine as a means of controlling the farm workers. As Scotty tells us, the "management promised em all kinda rewards in the form of extra rocks." (140)

Thus, cocaine addiction can also be read as an allegory for a modern form of slavery. Several critics argue that the farm where Darlene and her twelve-year-old son are exploited is a reinvention of the life of plantation during slavery where black people were enslaved and coerced (Ingram 24; Dunbar 53; Stuelke 75). However, characters in the novel are enslaved, in the first place, by their own desire for cocaine. The ships that used to bring slaves from Africa no longer exist, but they are replaced by night minibuses recruiting poor and desperate African Americans and using cocaine to lure them into accepting work on farms. The workers on the farm willingly choose to stay there as long as they have free access to cocaine. Allegorically speaking, then, modern slavery is a choice; one may choose to be enslaved in exchange for drugs. Hannaham himself refers to the role played by cocaine in enslaving people like Darlene. For him, addiction “is this other entity, this other person, this other thing that seems to be coming between you and the relationship with your relative, or your other loved ones” (“If Drugs”). Without addiction, Darlene would not have been humiliated like this by the employers on Delicious Farm. It is her own decision to leave her child all alone and to be enslaved because she prefers to stay so that she would have free access to cocaine. Thus, in modern slavery, people even choose to be enslaved: Bales and Soodalter argue that slave traders no longer have to use force or abduction to secure their victims. All they need to do is to offer a perceived opportunity, and the victims come voluntarily (13). An indication that slavery for Darlene is a choice is that when she has the chance to escape from her inhuman position on the farm, she refuses. Darlene is beaten and humiliated by How and sexually exploited by Sextus, the white owner of the place. When Sirius comes back to the farm after his escape to help the workers to get out of the farm, however, Darlene decides to stay as long as she can in order to have the cocaine she needs. Hence, she is mainly enslaved by her own desire for cocaine. It is only at the end of the novel when the farm is legally closed off, and she becomes seriously sick that Darlene decides to shake off the addiction bondage.

It is interesting that the narrative structure of the last two chapters of the novel copes up with the change in Darlene's priorities. When she decides to stop using cocaine, the narrative voice changes to respond to her metamorphosis. The last two chapters of the novel are narrated by both Darlene, after recovery, and an unnamed third-person extradiegetic narrator, respectively. In Chapter 28, Darlene narrates her own story after leaving the farm; she tells us how the farm is sold off, Sextus is sentenced to fifteen years in prison, and how she joins an



addict program, works as a waitress, and starts eating healthy food (*Delicious Foods* 350-57). Having Darlene as both narrator and focalizer near the end of the novel indicates that she is no longer controlled by drugs. Darlene's metamorphosis is also a choice; when she decides to fight cocaine addiction, she finds a way out. According to Stuelke, the "repair" for Darlene's life stems from "better choices: individual self-regulation and self-optimization" (80). For the first time in the novel, we hear Darlene's true voice; in the previous chapters, Scotty is her spokesman. This change in the narrative voice may also be symbolic of the late 1990s in America when cocaine epidemic began to wane. This change took place for different reasons such as the drug programs, imprisonment of many of those involving in selling and buying crack cocaine, and, more importantly, young people's realization of the destructive outcomes of crack addiction. (Farber 8-9)

In conclusion, meaning in the world of fiction is usually derived from events, characters, narrators, and settings that can be actualized in the real world. The discussion above, however, proves that meaning can also be inferred from the impossible, the anti-mimetic, and the unnatural. Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*, with its unnatural narrator and confusing narrative structure, is a bitter cry against the absurdities affecting the past and plaguing both the present and the future. By foregrounding the predicament of drugs and how it leads to human trafficking, Hannaham warns of a grim future awaiting humanity. These anomalies make it possible to naturalize the unnatural in Hannaham's narrative. While the novel was written and published amid an opioid epidemic breaking out in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is set during the crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. It is ironical that the interval between the temporal setting of the novel and its publication has not witnessed tangible improvement: if cocaine addiction waned after the 1990s, it was immediately replaced by opium, heroin, and other drugs, thus perpetuating the chain of addiction, prostitution, and other forms of human trafficking. Although crack cocaine as an object narrator is unnatural, it becomes conventionalized and accepted when interpreted in the light of these anomalies. Scotty is anti-mimetic and impossible as a narrator; nevertheless, it is tragically real; it conveys a realistic message about the impossible status quo in America as well as in the whole world; it is a postmodern world in which human beings, spirituality, and reason are losing power, while the destructive material world is gaining authority.

Recent developments in narrative theory by Alber and other unnaturalists align with the fluid, uncertain, and anomalous nature of postmodernism, reflecting the ramifications of this historical era. Unnatural narrators in fiction can be related to postmodernism in that they both challenge traditional narrative conventions and erase the distinction between truth and fiction. It could be argued, then, that the blending of the natural and the unnatural, as it is traced in Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*, is a key feature of postmodern fiction, as it challenges traditional notions of reality and creates a fluid and dynamic narrative in which reality and fantasy are constantly shifting and the boundaries between them are blurred. Thanks to unnatural narrative theory, it becomes critically obvious that postmodern fiction creates a space for new and unconventional forms of meaning and interpretation in which the unreal and the unnatural may represent reality more blatantly than the real and the natural.

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## الانحرافات السردية: دور الراوي غير الطبيعي في رواية الأطعمة اللذيذة للكاتب جيمس حناهام (٢٠١٥)

د. أشرف طه محمد قوطة

أستاذ مساعد الأدب الإنجليزي (رواية)

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية – كلية الآداب – جامعة دمياط - مصر

### المستخلص:

استناداً إلى المفاهيم النقدية لنظرية السرد غير الطبيعي، تبحث هذه الدراسة في الانحرافات السردية ودورها في رواية الأطعمة اللذيذة للكاتب جيمس حناهام (٢٠١٥). وفقاً لرواد نظرية السرد غير الطبيعي، يمكن تتبع مظاهر عدم الطبيعية في الرواية الواقعية في أربعة عناصر: الرواة، والشخصيات، والزمن، والمكان. يمكن تفسير السيناريوهات غير الطبيعية في السرد من خلال استراتيجيات معينة لقراءة النص الأدبي. وتركز هذه الدراسة بشكل خاص على تتبع جوانب وأدوار الراوي غير الطبيعي في رواية الأطعمة اللذيذة. تحتوي رواية حناهام على العديد من الرواة من منظور الشخص الثالث الغائب، ومن منظور الشخص الأول المتكلم. أكثر الرواة إبهاماً من بين هؤلاء الرواة هو الراوي غير الطبيعي، وهو الكوكابين، الذي يروي ما يقرب من نصف الرواية. على الرغم من أن الكوكابين ليس كائن حي، إلا أنه يلعب دور الراوي من منظور الشخص الأول المتكلم، كما أن له وجهة نظر سردية. علاوة على ذلك، على الرغم من أن الراوي من منظور الشخص الأول المتكلم ليس لديه بطبيعة الحال إمكانية الوصول إلى أفكار الشخصيات الأخرى وأماكن أخرى، يمكن للكوكابين أن يتسرب بسهولة إلى أذهان الشخصيات ويتنقل بحرية بين المواقع المختلفة. بتطبيق استراتيجيات القراءة الخاصة بنظرية السرد غير الطبيعي، تفسر الدراسة الحالية معنى ووظيفة هذه الانحرافات السردية، وتوضح كيف يتم تطبيعها في النهاية من خلال مزج الأطر المعرفية.

**الكلمات الدالة:** نظرية السرد غير الطبيعي؛ الراوي غير الطبيعي؛ جيمس حناهام؛ الأطعمة اللذيذة؛ الكوكابين؛ الاتجار بالبشر