SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal;**Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF) **ISSN:** 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-5(May);2026**

COMMODIFYING BODY, ILLNESS, AND HEALTH: STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN OMAR EL AKKAD'S *FACTORY AIR*

Dr. B. Mohamed Hussain Ahamed
Assistant Professor of English ,The New College, Chennai

Article Received: 20/04/2026
Article Accepted:23/05/2026
Published Online:24/05/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.05.329

Abstract

Using Paul Farmer's concept of structural violence as its theoretical lens, this paper examines how Omar El Akkad's short story *Factory Air* (2019) commodifies the body, illness, and health within the broader field of medical humanities. Through sustained close reading, the analysis traces how capitalist structures normalise the medicalisation of occupational harm, suppress workers' bodies into instruments of production, and distribute illness along predictable lines of class and power. The paper argues that the text enacts a sustained literary critique of health commodification, revealing how preventable suffering is institutionalised through economic rationalisation. Drawing on Farmer's tripartite framework, alongside scholarship in critical medical humanities, Marxist literary theory, and narrative medicine, the study demonstrates that El Akkad positions illness not as individual misfortune but as a structurally reproduced outcome. The central finding is that the factory operates simultaneously as a space of production and a space of managed biological harm, making *Factory Air* a politically alert intervention in contemporary debates about labour, health equity, and literary representation.

Keywords: Structural Violence, Health Commodification, Medical Humanities, Capitalism, De-medicalisation, Omar El Akkad

Introduction

Contemporary literature has increasingly attended to the uneven distribution of bodily suffering across social classes, giving rise to what scholars now call the medical humanities: an interdisciplinary field concerned with how cultural texts negotiate illness, health, and the human body within systems of power. Omar El Akkad's short fiction sits squarely within this tradition. Published in *Guernica* in March 2019, *Factory Air* offers a compressed but searching account of occupational disease, capitalist exploitation, and the deliberate suppression of workers' claims to bodily integrity. The story is set in a factory owned by the wealthy Rahim Ibn El Kul, whose workers, labouring under conditions of

severe respiratory harm, find their suffering absorbed into the operating logic of profit. Cassie, a worker and single mother, and her twelve, year, old daughter Dio, whose chronic cough indexes the systemic toxicity of their environment, stand at the narrative's emotional and analytical centre.

The theoretical apparatus that best illuminates these concerns is Paul Farmer's concept of structural violence, developed most fully in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (2003) and sustained across his subsequent work. Farmer argues that structural violence names the harm inflicted not by direct physical assault but by the arrangement of social, economic, and political institutions that systematically disadvantage specific populations while protecting others. Health, in this framework, is not a neutral biological condition; it is a social relation, unevenly produced and unequally distributed according to one's position within hierarchies of class, race, and geography. Illness among the poor is rarely accidental. It is, Farmer insists, the predictable consequence of structures that convert human lives into economic inputs and then refuse accountability for the damage this conversion causes (Farmer 8).

This paper applies Farmer's framework to *Factory Air*, arguing that El Akkad's text performs a literary instantiation of structural violence by dramatising how bodies, illness, and health are commodified within a fictional factory setting that nonetheless carries unmistakable resonance with contemporary global labour realities. Three dimensions of this commodification receive sustained analysis: first, the reduction of workers' bodies to economic inputs; second, the spatial and biological segregation of capitalist health from working-class illness; and third, the operation of what the paper terms 'managed negligence', the deliberate refusal to maintain safe conditions as a rational economic strategy. The paper further attends to the narrative's conclusion, in which Cassie's betrayal of the strike constitutes not a moral failure but a coerced individual adaptation to structural impossibility.

The central question driving the analysis is the following: how does El Akkad's *Factory Air* commodify body, illness, and health within the broader field of medical humanities, and to what extent does Farmer's structural violence framework render legible the text's political critique? The paper proceeds through a review of relevant scholarship, a methodological account, an analytical reading of the text, and a discussion that situates the findings within wider debates in critical medical humanities and narrative medicine.

Review of Literature

The intersection of literary representation and health inequity has attracted growing scholarly attention since at least the 1990s, when Arthur Kleinman's work on illness narratives established that stories of sickness are never merely clinical: they are saturated with social meaning, shaped by the structures within which patients and practitioners operate (Kleinman 3). This insight has since been developed in multiple directions. Rita Charon's foundational work in narrative medicine extended Kleinman's concern with the meaning of

illness to argue that attentiveness to narrative form is itself a clinical and ethical competence; the stories that patients and texts tell about sickness demand a reader equipped to recognise their social and moral dimensions (Charon 4). Both trajectories converge in medical humanities scholarship that treats literary texts as sites where the politics of health and illness become visible in ways that clinical or epidemiological discourse may suppress.

Paul Farmer's structural violence framework has proven productive across a range of disciplines, from medical anthropology to global health policy and, more recently, literary studies. Farmer's contention that health inequities are not naturally occurring but structurally produced, and that they follow the fault lines of class, race, and political economy, has been taken up by critics examining how literary texts either reproduce or interrogate these fault lines. Didier Fassin, writing in the tradition Farmer helped to establish, has argued that what he calls 'moral economies of inequality' shape how suffering is perceived, narrated, and responded to in public and institutional life (Fassin 251). Literary texts, on this account, participate in those moral economies: they may naturalise the suffering of the poor as inevitable, or they may expose its structural causation. El Akkad's fiction, as this paper argues, belongs emphatically to the latter mode.

Scholarship on El Akkad has focused primarily on his novel *American War* (2017), which examines displacement, trauma, and state violence through a near-future dystopian lens. Critics have noted his sustained concern with the experience of those rendered disposable by political and economic systems (Deckard 112). *Factory Air* has received less critical attention, possibly because of its shorter form. Still, its engagement with labour, illness, and power is at least as politically sophisticated as anything in the longer work. The story participates in a broader tradition of literary labour writing that includes, among many others, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), both of which expose the bodily costs of capitalist labour regimes. El Akkad's text updates this tradition by embedding it within a more explicitly theoretical vocabulary of commodification.

Marxist literary criticism offers a further set of tools relevant to the analysis. Georg Lukács's account of reification, the process by which social relations are transformed into things, like quantifiable objects, has particular resonance for a text in which human bodies are treated as raw materials in the production process (Lukács 83). Reification, in the factory setting El Akkad describes, is not merely an ideological distortion but a lived bodily condition: workers experience their own physicality as something mortgaged to the imperatives of capital. This dimension of the text connects the structural violence framework to the Marxist critique of alienated labour, suggesting that El Akkad is working within a long tradition of thinking about the relationship between economic organisation and human embodiment.

Scholarship in environmental humanities has also addressed how toxicity and occupational disease are distributed unevenly across populations. Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence', violence that is gradual, dispersed, and therefore difficult to narrate, is particularly germane here (Nixon 2). The respiratory illness that afflicts Cassie's daughter, Dio, is slow violence made visible: it accumulates invisibly in the lungs over time, resisting the dramatic immediacy that usually attaches the label of 'violence' to an act. El Akkad's narrative strategy, which makes the biological consequences of this slow harm viscerally legible through Dio's cough, could be read as a literary answer to the problem Nixon identifies: how to represent violence that lacks spectacle.

Methodology

This paper employs close reading as its primary analytical method. Close reading, within literary studies, denotes a form of sustained, attentive engagement with the language, structure, and rhetoric of a text, attending to the precise words chosen, the images deployed, the narrative perspectives adopted, and the ideological work that these formal elements perform. As Jonathan Culler has argued, close reading is not an end in itself but a mode of engaging with the social and ethical dimensions of literary texts through their formal particularity (Culler 30). Applied here, close reading enables an examination of exactly how El Akkad constructs the commodification of bodies and illness: through what metaphors, whose perspective, and with what narrative consequences.

The theoretical framework guiding the close reading is Farmer's structural violence, supplemented by insights from Marxist literary criticism, critical medical humanities, and environmental humanities. This combination allows the analysis to move between the micro level of textual detail and the macro level of structural argument without reducing either to the other. The analysis neither treats El Akkad's text as a transparent window onto social reality nor reads it in isolation from the material conditions it addresses. Instead, it treats the text as a mediated, formally constructed account of those conditions, one whose literary choices are themselves politically significant.

The primary text under analysis is El Akkad's “Factory Air,” as published in Guernica in March 2019. All quotations are drawn from this source. Secondary sources have been selected for their relevance to the theoretical frameworks deployed, their scholarly standing, and their specificity to the claims being made. The paper does not undertake a systematic review of the entire field of medical humanities but engages selectively with scholarship that directly illuminates the dimensions of the text under discussion. The methodology is therefore interpretive and theoretical rather than empirical, consistent with the conventions of literary studies and critical humanities research.

Analysis

Bodies as Raw Material

The opening register of *Factory Air* establishes, with minimal ornamentation, the terms under which the factory's workers understand their own existence. Labour in this

setting is rendered as pure exchange: "no more than an exchange of vaporous commodities. Effort for pay, wellbeing for survival, time for time" (El Akkad). The triple parallelism of this formulation, effort/pay, wellbeing/survival, time/time, performs rhetorically the equivalence that capitalism imposes materially. Each element of the worker's person is assigned a market counterpart. Notably, the exchange of time for time is circular and self-defeating: the worker gives time to receive time to survive in order to give more time. There is no surplus available to the labourer; the exchange is structured to reproduce itself without remainder.

This dynamic of bodily mortgaging is made more explicit when the narrator observes that the workers understood they "mortgaged your airways doing this kind of work" (El Akkad). The respiratory system, the most intimate, involuntary dimension of embodied life, the process that sustains existence breath by breath, is here figured as collateral. The mortgage metaphor is telling: mortgaged property is still used by the borrower but has been pledged against debt, subject to foreclosure. The workers breathe, but their capacity to breathe freely has been pledged against their economic survival. This is not metaphorical in any loose sense; the text makes it literal. Workers inhale "waste particulate, the evaporated chemicals, the dust, the heaviness," causing their airways to eventually seize "like waterlogged engines" (El Akkad). The simile converts the human body into machinery in the most deflationary possible way: engines that have been neglected, flooded, and rendered inoperative.

Lukács's account of reification is useful here. For Lukács, reification is the process by which persons are treated as things, by which social relations, including the relation between a worker and an employer, are experienced as relations between objects with measurable, exchangeable properties. El Akkad's factory does not merely practise reification ideologically; it enforces it biologically. The workers' bodies are restructured by their labour conditions. Their lungs become damaged machinery. Their physical capacity for survival is progressively diminished in proportion to their service to the production process. When the narrative describes workers as "anonymous gears in the machinery of the world" (El Akkad), this is not figurative hyperbole but a precise account of what the factory does to persons: it incorporates them as components. It replaces them when they wear out (Lukács 90).

The Spatial Politics of Health

One of the most formally accomplished dimensions of El Akkad's narrative is its use of spatial contrast to dramatise the structural segregation of health and illness. Rahim lives on a hill above the factory, in air so pristine that "it carried no scent, no familiar sting of chemicals or refuse" (El Akkad). The geographical elevation is, of course, an economic elevation: Rahim's position above the smog is a direct function of the profits generated by the workers below, who produce the pollution from which he is insulated. This spatial arrangement literalises what Farmer calls the geography of blame, in which the poor are located in environments that damage them while the wealthy occupy protected zones whose cleanliness is financed by that damage (Farmer 45).

In contrast to the workers' progressive biological deterioration, Rahim is described as maintaining an "aggressive facsimile of youth" (El Akkad). The adjective 'aggressive' is significant: Rahim's youth is not natural but purchased, sustained by wealth against the biological time that the workers cannot arrest. His health is, in the most literal sense, commodified, bought with money generated by the commodification of others' bodies. This produces a structure of inverse proportionality at the heart of the narrative: as the workers' bodies deteriorate, Rahim's maintains its purchased vigour. The factory is the mechanism of this transfer, converting bodily harm in one population into health resources for another.

Cassie's twelve, year, old daughter Dio carries the most concentrated embodiment of this harm. Dio's cough is described with unflinching precision: "like a butcher's knife against pavement, a scraping" (El Akkad). The simile is deliberately industrial, evoking not merely discomfort but violence, the kind of percussive, metallic violence associated with hard material surfaces. A child's cough should not summon this register; the fact that it does signals the degree to which the factory's operations have penetrated and disfigured the most vulnerable body in the narrative. Dio has never worked in the factory. Her illness is inherited from her mother's environment, transmitted through proximity and shared air. This intergenerational dimension of the harm aligns closely with what Farmer identifies as one of the defining features of structural violence: it reproduces itself across generations, ensuring that the children of the poor inherit not wealth but biological vulnerability (Farmer 79).

Managed Negligence and Institutional Harm

The factory's violence is not merely the incidental byproduct of production; it is, the narrative suggests, a managed and deliberate feature of the operating model. The collapse at Silo 216, which 'left fifteen dead' (El Akkad), is not presented as an accident in any meaningful sense. Helen, a worker who serves as the narrative's most politically articulate voice, makes the causation explicit when she tells Rahim that the infrastructure is so degraded that "the bolts so rusted, they come off in your hands" (El Akkad). The remedy, she notes, "would be a rounding error for you" (El Akkad), a sum so small relative to Rahim's wealth as to be arithmetically negligible. That Rahim has nonetheless not repaired is not oversight but a decision. The maintenance of dangerous conditions is economically rational from the perspective of capital: the cost of repair exceeds, within the calculation that governs Rahim's choices, the cost of the lives it would save.

This is precisely what Farmer means by structural violence. The harm is not enacted by a single blow but by the sustained refusal to act, by the institutional choice to allow preventable suffering to continue because its continuation serves the interests of those with the power to prevent it. Nixon's framework of slow violence is equally applicable: the fifteen deaths at Silo 216 are the sudden eruption of a slow, building structural negligence, a moment when accumulated harm becomes visible in the form of fatality (Nixon 3). The factory's security apparatus, "tear gas and rubber bullets", turned on workers who protested their

conditions (El Akkad), represents the direct violence that enforces the slow violence. Both forms are present in the narrative, and their co-presence maps closely onto Farmer's insistence that structural violence is always backed, ultimately, by coercive force.

Rahim's self-justifying philosophical position deserves close attention, for it represents the ideological complement to the structural arrangements the narrative has been describing. When confronted with the human cost of his operations, Rahim does not deny it. Instead, he defends it as a condition of reality: he sees “the world as it is” (El Akkad). He elaborates: “the world in which that factory puts your wellbeing first is not the same world in which that factory exists in the first place” (El Akkad). This statement is philosophically sophisticated and politically dangerous. It presents the exploitation of workers not as a choice but as a metaphysical necessity, as if the factory's existence and the workers' suffering were logically entailed by each other such that eliminating the suffering would eliminate the factory. This reasoning is, of course, ideological in the Marxist sense: it naturalises a historically produced social arrangement, treating capitalism's particular organisation of labour as equivalent to reality itself.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that *Factory Air* constitutes a sustained literary engagement with the politics of health commodification, employing narrative form to make legible the structural conditions under which illness is produced and distributed. El Akkad's text does not merely represent suffering; it performs a structural analysis of suffering's causes, embedding Farmer's conceptual framework within the experiential register of literary narrative. This is a significant literary, political achievement: it makes structural violence available to readerly feeling rather than confining it to theoretical abstraction.

Cassie's decision to betray the strike in exchange for clean air and water for herself and Dio has been the point in the narrative most susceptible to misreading. A hasty reading might render her choice as moral weakness or self-interest. Within the framework of structural violence, however, her decision is more accurately understood as the coerced adaptation of an agent who has correctly assessed the impossibility of individual resistance to systemic power. She cannot dismantle the factory. She cannot cure Dio's lungs. She can negotiate, within the terms the system offers, a partial and individual escape from the most acute biological harm. When she tells Rahim, “I want nothing... I want all the nothing you have” (El Akkad), the paradox is precise: 'nothing', the absence of toxic air, is the most desperately desired good in this world. That clean air figures as 'nothing' registers its absolute commodification: it has value only as something that can be withheld from those who cannot pay.

Charon's narrative medicine framework is instructive at this point. Charon argues that medicine's ethical obligations require attentiveness to the stories patients tell about their suffering, including the structures that shape and constrain those stories (Charon 9). El

Akkad's narrative enacts this attentiveness at the level of fiction. It does not merely record Cassie's suffering but insists on the structural conditions that produce it, refusing to allow her individual story to be received as a private misfortune. The same function is served by the narrative's refusal of sentimental resolution: Cassie does not achieve justice, and Dio does not recover. What the narrative offers instead is comprehension, a structural account of why things are as they are.

The implications for the field of medical humanities are considerable. If, as Kleinman argued, illness narratives are always socially shaped, then literary texts that expose the social shaping of illness perform a kind of counter-narrative: they resist the individualisation of suffering that both clinical discourse and popular representation tend to enforce (Kleinman 27). *Factory Air* achieves this resistance through the persistent precision of its social detail, the rusted bolts, the smog geography, the 'rounding error' calculation, which ensures that Cassie's suffering cannot be abstracted from the institutional structures that produce it. In this respect, the story enacts what Fassin has called an 'ethics of otherness': a refusal to render the suffering of the structurally disadvantaged as simply the background condition of their existence (Fassin 256).

One further dimension of the narrative merits comment in this context: the role of language itself in sustaining structural violence. Rahim's philosophical rhetoric, his appeal to 'the world as it is', is not only ideological in its content but strategic in its function. It forecloses the conceptual possibility of alternatives, presenting the current arrangement as ontologically necessary rather than historically contingent. Literary reading, as Culler suggests, has a distinctive capacity to expose this kind of rhetorical closure, to make visible the motivated choices that ideological language presents as natural facts (Culler 45). El Akkad's narrative performs this exposure by placing Rahim's rationalisation in direct juxtaposition with the bodily reality of Dio's cough, the fifteen dead workers, and Cassie's impossible choice. The contrast between the eloquence of capitalist self, justification and the visceral weight of its consequences is itself a formal argument.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Omar El Akkad's *Factory Air* constitutes a significant literary contribution to the medical humanities, one that deploys the resources of narrative fiction to make the logic of structural violence experientially and analytically legible. Through close reading informed by Farmer's theoretical framework, supplemented by scholarship in Marxist literary criticism, narrative medicine, and environmental humanities, the analysis has traced three interlocking dimensions of the text's critique: the reduction of workers' bodies to economic raw materials; the spatial and biological segregation of capitalist health from working, class illness; and the operation of managed negligence as a rational institutional strategy. These three dimensions together constitute El Akkad's account of health commodification, a process in which the body's integrity is not incidentally damaged

but systematically converted into surplus value for those with the power to enforce that conversion.

The narrative's particular contribution is its refusal to aestheticise or sentimentalise the suffering it represents. Dio's cough, the rusted bolts, the fifteen dead, Cassie's paradoxical desire for 'nothing', each detail accumulates toward a structural account rather than a personal tragedy. In this way, *Factory Air* performs at the level of literary form what Farmer argues at the level of theory: that illness among the poor is not misfortune but violence, not accident but structure. The story is, finally, a work of political anatomy, a dissection of the body politic that insists on naming what it finds.

Future scholarship might extend the present analysis in several directions. A comparative study of *Factory Air* alongside El Akkad's longer fiction would illuminate the thematic and formal continuities in his engagement with structural violence and political economy. A reception-oriented study might examine how the story has been read within and beyond literary communities, and whether its critique has been absorbed or domesticated by the platforms of circulation available to it. Finally, a more extended engagement with postcolonial medical humanities scholarship would sharpen the analysis of the story's implicit geography, for the factory setting, while left deliberately unlocated, carries resonances with the global South contexts in which much of the world's most dangerous industrial labour is concentrated. These remain productive avenues for inquiry that the scope of the present paper has not permitted.

Works Cited

Charon, Rita. Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Culler, Jonathan. Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Deckard, Sharae. “Postcolonial Ecologies and the Literature of Climate Change.” The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Literary Studies, edited by Sharae Deckard and Stefan Helgesson, Routledge, 2020, pp. 108–120.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America. Metropolitan Books, 2001.

El Akkad, Omar. “Factory Air.” Guernica, 25 Mar. 2019,

El Akkad, Omar. American War. Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

Farmer, Paul. Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor. University of California Press, 2003.

Fassin, Didier. “Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life.” Public Culture, vol. 19, no. 3, 2007,

pp. 499–520.
Fassin, Didier. When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa. University of California Press, 2007.
Kleinman, Arthur. The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition. Basic Books, 1988.
Lukács, Georg. History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, 1971.
Nixon, Rob. Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. Harvard University Press, 2011.
Sinclair, Upton. The Jungle. Doubleday, Page and Company, 1906.
Williams, Raymond. Marxism and Literature. Oxford University Press, 1977.
Zola, Irving Kenneth. "Medicine as an Institution of Social Control." The Sociological Review, vol. 20, no. 4, 1972, pp. 487–504.