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Decolonizing the Mind: The politics of survival in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer (2013)*

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ABSTRACT

This study traces the intersection of trauma, war, and the politics of survival in post-war Iraqi fiction through a keen critical analysis of Sinan Antoon's masterpiece, *The Corpse Washer* (2013). The study examines how prolonged violence, foreign occupation, sectarian war, and political instability influence both individual subjectivity and social memory in contemporary Iraqi landscape, situating the novel within postcolonial and trauma theory frameworks. The study explores how the novel challenges prevailing imperial trajectories and narratives Iraqi lived experience through intimate storytelling, drawing on theories of decolonization, especially Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's idea of "decolonizing the mind." The novel illustrates how individual and collective identities are fragmented under implications of occupation and systemic ruin through the protagonist Jawad, an aspiring sculptor forced by fate to take on his father's skill of washing the corpses. A sheer crisis of self in a culture where death consistently eclipses art, beauty, and normalcy is reflected in Jawad's internal struggle. The study argues that this conflict between ceremonial work and creative desire represents the fight to protect humanity in the face of dehumanizing mechanism. Through the lens of Ngũgĩ Thiong'o's theory of decolonization, Antoon's novel offers a significant contribution to decolonization of the mind as a "writing history back" narrative that challenge dominant western mindset of Iraq as solely site of war, violence, and radical thoughts. Through the multifaceted figure of Jawad, the protagonist, who works as corpse's washer, Antoon asserts Iraqi subjectivity, showing a deeply human outlook on trauma, chaos, and survival.

KEYWORDS: Decolonization, Gloom vs bloom, Spiritual awareness, The Politics of Survival, Writing History Back

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Introduction

The trajectory of Iraqi fiction following the American invasion in 2003 has emerged as a crucial literary platform for comprising the traumatic experience of the war-torn Baghdad, the sectarian divide, thus articulating a narrative overwhelmingly marked by the historical rupture of war and fragmentation. Needless to say, the notion of "decolonizing the mind," as coined by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, becomes prior to deeply understanding how Iraqi writers manage to maintain narrative authority from prevailing Western portrayals of war and genocide. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wonders why African writers prioritize colonial tongues and devaluing their own, languages, emphasizing that valid decolonization entails maintaining native languages and intellectual resistance:

> Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages? How can we 'prey' on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggles of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own?(p. 8)

Central to decolonization, Ngũgĩ argues, is a true liberation which happens with language at first. In other words, decolonizing the mind is synonymous with reclaiming native languages as elements of knowledge, innovation, and resilience rather than allowing colonial voices to conquer their linguistic and cultural legacy. Hence, linguistic decolonization, as depicted Antoon's narrative, reshapes Iraqi memory against colonial linguistic discourse, echoing the intellectual aspiration theorized by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. He also confirms that imperialism does not hinge only on political or economic authority, but rather on a "cultural bomb" that subverts people's national identity and language and not to mention belief in their own cultural richness. Moreover, he argues that remarkably political and economic liberation requires maintaining native languages and social traditions, due to the fact that cultural hegemony is the most destructive weapon imposed to silence the oppressed nation. When one have a deeply look on the post-war Iraqi production of novels, they notice that meticulously challenge imposed representations of the west by sharing a common interest in picturing the lived traumatic experience, cultural memory, and the psychological rupture of war, thereby transforming the Iraqi literature after the American colonialism into a new vistas of resistance and intellectual recovery.

This study, by and large, approaches Sinan Antoon's prolific novel *The Corpse Washer,* as a significant exploration of violence, trauma, and survival in the shadow of inevitably horrific war. Through its close representation of a young man compelled to wash the bodies of the war victims, the chosen novel examines the politics of survival in a society plagued by war, loss, and violence. The act of situating individual trauma and grief within larger implications of colonial power, the text not only describes suffering of the oppressed but also redeems Iraqi subjectivity, leading to a narrative that challenge dehumanization and contends the misery and torment of the war-torn Iraq.

This study also uses contemporary trauma theory of Cathy Caruth to explore Antoon's representation of war and trauma and their profound impact on Iraqi peoples. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth argued that power of the trauma is not just that the suffering is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is exacerbated through its inherent latency that it is first experienced by the victims:

> [...]trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience.(p. 58)

Among a plethora of issues, trauma is relatedly close in theory and literary texts to enduring rupture of living in wars, being dislocated from the homeland, along with the post-traumatic stress effect that soldiers indulged in the war went through.

Given the fact that Antoon writes from an outsider-insider perspective, he looks at the individual trauma as a central representation of war's impact, which certainly invokes collective trauma imposed by the

war upon his country. After a deep journey of Antoon's cross-cultural and fictional world, the article raises a probing question: how does Antoon manage to depict the war and its impact to convey the kaleidoscopic trauma experience of the individuals he portrays? In this regard, this question opens the door wide for different potentials through which Antoon represents trauma as a catalyst of how he closely interwoven the traumatic agony of individuals to the uneasiness of their horrific memories for the war as a key factor behind their bitter trauma.

Building on the naunced depiction of war , trauma, and violence, *The Corpse Washer* projects narrative authority as a type of decolonization, questioning the distortedly imposed image of Iraq as a site of persistent violence and extremism. The study also presented the novel as a literary reflection over inflicted trauma rather than a reproduction of Western war traditions.

Antoon's novel highlights the memories and dimensions of the conflict-ridden Iraq as both individual and socio-political phenomenon, locating personal grief within the wider context of Iraq's post-war climate . Antoon thus compromises quotidian rituals with the ethical values of endurance to undermine imposed narratives of victimization, offering a sapce for the collective identity of Iraq as something sublimely surviving and beyond any simplistic classification of identity reconstruction.

The Politics of Survival in *The Corpse Washer*: Between Ruins and Remains

In *The Corpse Washer,* Sinan Antoon juxtaposes the politics of survival within a county besieged by inner ruins and human remains, where death represents both a recurring reality and a symbolic motif leading to a new life. In this context the novel offers subtle critiques for the real situation of contemporary Iraq wherein the act of survival itself becomes existential journey, transforming death a space for new life no matter what loss and agony:

> [...] art was intimately linked with immortality: a challenge to death and time, a celebration of life. He said that our ancestors in Mesopotamia were the first to pose all these questions in their myths and in the epic of Gilgamesh, and that Iraq was the first and biggest art workshop in the world.(Antoon, p. 31)

In *Corporeality in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction*, Hanan Khammas situates Antoon's heavy reliance on creating "the narrative of dreams and nightmares —which interrupts the lineal narrative yet completes it"(317) This trajectory of narrative tradition takes the reader into a Gothic journey from the real to imaginative realm, and from realism to magic realism, blurring the way between the conscious to the unconscious spectrum. Through Jawad's fluctuation between his inherited job of washing the corpses and his penchant for creative escape, Antoon makes a subtle shift of escaping from reality—an inner withdraw into memory, imagination, and graceful yearning. This tension between spiritual ruins and physical remains locates Jawad's survival as a bridge between imbibing the ruins and temporarily going beyond hardships, showing how subjectivity flourishes amid times of war and crises.

Published in Arabic as (*Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* [*The Pomegranate Alone*] in 2010 and translated into English by Antoon himself in 2013 as *The Corpse Washer*, the novel is notably a counter-narrative of American mainstream mindset that have historically diminished Iraq into a mere a geopolitical landscape defined by war, sectarian divide, and racial conflicts. The idea of self-translation reinforces the notion of 'writing history back' in a very suggestive and evocative way. In doing so, Antoon suggests that the tapestry of meaning and cultural implications of the text are better conveyed and filtered by the native translator than the alien one. More importantly, I argue that, this act of self-translation challenges the postcolonial impulse of narrative authority, surviving one's own culture and text rather than letting western literary traditions narrate/define it. Thus, Antoon brilliantly re-writes Iraqi history in Arabic and English, speaking to global readers and reassuring the idea that Iraq is the land of literary excellence and the cradle of ancient civilizations.

Bill Ashcroft's argument that "Received history is tampered with, rewritten, and realigned from the point of view of the victims of its destructive progress"(34), opens for us an insightful critical window for reading Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* as a text that 'writes history back' par excellence. Antoon, through his protagonist, Jawad, invites readers to the ancient and rich history of Iraq and how Iraqis since time memorial "[...]inventing writing and building the first cities and temples, the first works of art and statues had appeared

in ancient Iraq during the Sumerian era and now fill museums all over the world "(p. 31).
In her essay "Beyond the Trauma of War: Iraqi Literature Today", Yasmeen Hanoosh critiques the simplistic depiction of Iraq's history and call on Iraqi writers to write a literature that better represent the cultural tradition of the nation:

> The strangeness with which the work of many contemporary Iraqi writers at once rivets and disorients the reader is perhaps the best metaphor for the incongruity of modern Iraq's cultural and political history, and a shrewd reminder of the cyclical nature of the country's collective calamities. One shared aspect the selected excerpts articulate about contemporary Iraqi literature is its defiance. They reflect the Iraqi state's failure to achieve full cultural hegemony over its intellectuals.(p. 3)

Hence, Hanoosh shares Antoon's interest of invoking history back and skillfully captures how the literary confusion of contemporary Iraqi writers embody the historical and political feeling of loss and despair, believing that aesthetic fragmentation is not mere experience but a mode of lived split. In times of crisis, life becomes paralleled with death and here Jawad is a representational figure of thousands of Iraqi who live on the brink of the unknown:

> If death is a postman, then I receive his letters every day. I am the one who opens carefully the bloodied and torn envelopes. I am the one who washes them, who removes the stamps of death and dries and perfumes them, mumbling what I don't entirely believe in. Then I wrap them carefully in white so they may reach their final reader-the grave.(Antoon, p. 3)

The fear of death is transformed into a daily visitor for Jawad, illustrating how harsh reality of life during war times becomes a shelter for the victims rather than escape from it. The process of washing the letters and wrapping the envelopes of death invokes an atmosphere of celebrated agony, yet the Jawad's ambivalent mood "mumbling" highlights how survival is interwoven with grief, yet humanity survives through rituals of shared pain and recollection.

Lamya Khammas argues that Antoon employs "self-reflection within the context of history and memory to effectively depict and shape the damaged characteristics of his character"(354). Thus, Antoon goes beyond historiographic texts, blending elements of modernism and postmodernism to depict Iraq's legacy of prolonged fragmentation through narrative frameworks like escaping realities, memories, resilience, and flashbacks. Motivated by his love to art, Jawad often sketches and paints Ghayda to escape the mundane of death:

> I found myself sketching her face [Ghayda] and body in my notebook of the dead to distract myself. It was a way of running away from death, running toward her. Then I felt guilty for imprisoning her body with the names of the dead, so I set aside a new notebook for her alone and started taking it with me to work every day. From memory, I sketched her painting her toenails.(Antoon, p. 147)

Jawad's pilgrimage to art is deeply symbolic, allowing him a self-shelter from the obstacles of life and war, where intellectual rituals forms a space of boldly facing death and the loss of comfort. This also shows Antoon's interest that art can be a valid psychological therapy amid times turmoil and devastation.

Gloom Vs. Bloom: The Pomegranate Tree as a Catalyst of Iraqi Survival

In *The Corpse Washer,* Sinan Antoon meticulously utilizes the connotation of the pomegranate tree as a suggestive and dialectical motif that delineates the blurring vision between gloom and bloom within the realm of contemporary Iraqi landscape. Located within a narrative surrounded by death, sectarian divided, and the psychological fragmentation brought about by war, the tree stands not only as a natural motif but as a living catalyst to the omnipresence of dead and gloom. While the novel's setting is narrated through gloomy atmosphere—depicted in the protagonist's given job of washing the corpses—the recurring image of the pomegranate tree reinforces bloom, rebirth, spiritual salvation , and the unshakable faith of survival amid devastation. Critically, the tree emerges as a dynamic catalyst of Iraqi survival by twisting the narrative within

the cyclical trajectory of nature rather than the sophisticated inevitability of death. Thus, Antoon articulates the linear path of survival through the cultural and ecological prism of the pomegranate, emphasizing that even in times of mass destruction and human decay, the Iraqi land triumphs and thus insists on renewal, memory recollections, and non-violence resistance.

Jawad's journey towards self-realization seeks to coexist with the recurring incidents of ruin and torments which, according to Khammas H. J. calls "the hero's [Jawad's] interrupted memories, nightmares, and daily tormented life"(p. 318). The novel starts with the depiction of the *Mghaysil*, the place where Muslim rituals of washing the dead bodies before sending them to the grave take place:

> When his father took him to this place for the first time when he was only fifteen, Jawad showed his desire not to be there. He describes this horrifying experience: "I got to the *Mghaysil*… The door was ajar. I crossed the walkway and saw the Qur'anic verse 'Every soul shall taste death'. … Father was sitting in the left corner of the side room on a wooden chair listening to the radio." He adds: "Death's traces - its scents and memories - were present in every inch of that place. As if death were the real owner and Father merely an employee working for it and not for God, as he liked to think. (Antoon, p. 11)

Jawad's sense of personal anguish worsens due to the loss of his brother, girlfriend and not mention a number of of his family relatives. Jawad's loss is representational to the collective misery of thousands of Iraqi civilians whose sorrow, according to Kai Erickson, is attributed to a "constellation of life's experiences, a prolonged exposure to danger or a continuing pattern of abuse" (p. 457).

In this regard, Michelle Balaev suggests that narrative has the capability to turn enduring sufferings into an interpretive behavior that makes individual crisis publicly visible:

> The novel offers an artistic interpretation of consciousness that draws attention to areas of human experience that might be overlooked or denied in society and brings the discussion of trauma into public view. Taking up this conversation in the following pages, I explore the ways that narrative depictions express and ascribe value to trauma and the process of remembering. (xix)

Balaev's argument invites readers to embrace narrative as a unique form of consciousness and boldly facing the obstacles that are often silenced in the given discourse. This idea is truly applicable to Antoon's chosen text wherein Jawad embraces psychological suffering not just as an individual fragility, but as a credible record through which he retells Iraq's collective anguish. Whenever Jawad feels haunted, he turns to artistic practices—reading, love rituals, painting, and singing—as a sheltering space of catharsis and mental resilience. Wael Salam and Ayman Abu-Shomar argue that "the clash between art/life and death/washing corpses contrasts one's own desire and passion with familial traditions and external forces"(31). This brings to our attention how art helps Jawad to remain resilient regardless of his father's rigid beliefs' that washing dead bodies is an honorable job of securing income for the family. The novel describes Jawad's haunted spirit by the horrific impression of living with dead bodies while still clinging to his inner impulse to bloom and escape harsh life through symbolic implications even amid his mundane profession of washing the corpses:

> During the past two years, I had carried the children I washed and put them in their coffins while Mahdi watched. I carried the shrouded head and placed it in the coffin. I forgot to include a branch of pomegranate or palm. Mahdi brought the cover and I covered it and said to the old man, "God have mercy on his soul[...]Mahdi helped them carry the coffin outside. We sat together in silence, neither of us wanting to say anything about the head. I added Habib's name to the new notebook I had started after filling the last one. Next to his name I wrote, "severed head".(pp. 157-158)

The above quote illustrates the protagonist's self-journey of reconciliation. In other words, Jawad tries to balance the haunted rituals of death with the preservation of individual memory, as he mentions his beloved

names and memories "added Habib's name to the new notebook", even while being busy with the brutal tasks of the corpse. This juxtaposition invites the reader's attention to the narrative's wider critique of how war and decay ruins human rapport, yet the act of recording one's memories becomes a subtle mode of resistance and recollection in the face of crisis, a theme prior to Antoon's fictional vision. The narrative culminates with Jawad journey of self-realization to visit Imam Al-Kazim and the manifestation with the figure of an aimless wanderer, suggesting a significant shift in the readers' mindset:

> I looked at the two domes and minarets and then the black sky. My eyes descended again to the domes and then the entrance to the mausoleum. I started a silent conversation with al-Kazim. I told him: Forgive me for not visiting you for so many years, but I have chosen another path. A path paved with doubt that doesn't lead to mosques. It is a rough and rugged path, not taken by crowds, with very few travel companions. I am still walking on it and I have ended up in prison just as you did, master. But I am imprisoned by my family and my people. I'm a prisoner of the death which has overtaken this land. It is time for me to escape. My mother is on the opposite side asking you to keep me by her side and by yours, but she might not realize that this daily death will poison me if I stay here.(Antoon, p. 196)

Jawad's journey to the shrine of Imam Al-Kazim (peace be upon him) plays a crucial role in the process of self and spiritual-reconstruction. The symbolic significance of this religious place in reshaping Jawad's identity recollects what Hanoosh calls the "conceptual restructuring of iconic Iraqi places and discourses, together the Iraqi works in this issue, defy our standard knowledge of the procession of historical events in modem Iraq"(p. 3).

The act of talking to the Imam as if he were alive enables Jawad to create a form of dialectical grief—an attempt to bridge the gap between gloom and bloom, presence and absence. More to the point, " I am a stranger like you and I am crying for myself" (Antoon, p. 170) ,Jawad's identification with the esteemed figure of Imam as a "stranger" indicates his inward alienation in a country replete with mass destruction and loss. The paralleled connection between shrine dignity and corpse washing highlights the urge for human purification and resilience in the face of war's gloomy memories while questioning whether acts can really guarantee credible heal for deep collective and individual loss.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *The Corpse Washer* is multifaceted literary text for exploring the politics survival in contemporary Iraq landscape by interweaving gloomy rituals and artistic practices of Jawad's quest for self and spiritual-realizations. The novel poignantly challenges narratives of western literary tradition and highlights Antoon's heavy weight of writing history back to critique hegemonic agency and occupation. Antoon skillfully questions narratives that describes Iraq only as a land of extremism and radical thoughts, instead enhancing individual dignity and richness of Iraq's history. Using a postcolonial and decolonization theory, the analysis manifests how the novel seeks to assist Iraqi subjectivity and simultaneously subvert cultural erasure. lastly, *The Corpse Washer*, concluded that reassures Antoon's reliance on the Jawad's talent of storytelling, suggesting how the new Iraq, like the pomegranate tree, outlives and blooms as a paradise of Semitic languages, Prophets and ancient civilizations.

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