

Prolonged War Trauma in Sinan Antoon's, "The Corpse Washer"

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This paper investigates how Sinan Antoon, the author and translator of "The Corpse Washer", exposes to the public view the trauma of war and the horror of violence in Iraq, post 2003. Further, he discusses the impact of the physical and mental wounds left by trauma on the main character's psyche and his family structure. I also intend to prove that traumatic experience hinders identity development. Antoon discusses the concept of suffering and pain in the Iraqi community post 2003. He creates a picture of Iraq where all Iraqis after colonialism are victims of violence. Trauma theory is a useful field to understand the injuries of Iraqis in a long-lasting period of suffering and oppression.

Keywords: *Trauma, war, violence, traumatised individuals, isolation.*

Introduction

Iraqi authors, who were subjugated and oppressed during Saddam Hussein's reign, found the long-desired freedom to describe life in Iraq, post 2003. Most people were hopeful that three decades of oppression and dictatorship finally came to an end. They appeared optimistic of swift transformation towards a democratic system and full independence. Generally, war and its mass production of death in Iraq traumatised Iraqis and deformed their view of life. Iraq in the period after and during the American colonisation witnessed an extraordinary production of literary works that sought to retell the war's terrible influence on all Iraqis.

Iraqi writers, as Laurie Vickroy says, "go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within [their] consciousness and structures" (Vickroy, p. xiv). The postcolonial Iraqi novel discusses different themes like the shattered identity, war, oppression, discrimination and other themes which were not openly discussed in the traditional novel before 2003. Wars, commonly known as mass producers of death, traumatise humans and deeply affect their

views of life. War literature studies the influence of war on the human psyche; the different attitudes towards war and the interpretations of human nature and human violence. In Iraqi literature, the theme of war plays a major role. The trauma of war they experience renders Iraqis handicapped and perplexed. They do not know what to do next with their lives. The traumatic experiences affect their lives deeply. They create narratives that cast war as destructive, perverse and traumatic. The war forced thousands of refugees to leave their land and live in a foreign land, to which they do not belong.

The word trauma is more often used in psychology than literature. It means the injury of the body but in modern times, it comes to mean the injury of the mind and not the body. Erikson argues that trauma has been taken from a "stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior" to a "state or condition produced by such a stress or blow" (p. 184). The individual is traumatised because his or her brain is not ready to receive the shock. The event happens quickly and abruptly. The traumatised individual does not realise that he or she is traumatised until after the event. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). Basically, the minds of the individuals are strongly influenced by past trauma and traumatic reminiscences. The main causes of psychological trauma are a lack of security, fear, bewilderment, sexual abuse, bigotry, racism, domestic violence, war, betrayal, deceit and above all, childhood and terrible experiences which lead to violent and aggressive behaviour. People's reactions are different. Some people are traumatised quickly and they take time to move beyond their trauma, while others are not affected by the traumatic event.

The twentieth century is called the age of trauma because we are living in an age of uncertainty; of terror; of wars and pressure. There are two types of trauma. Firstly, direct trauma is where the individual is experiencing the event directly and he or she survives the catastrophic event. The second type is what E. Ann Kaplan calls "vicarious trauma" (p. 39), where the individual is traumatised through media or films or through reading horrific events in newspapers. Kaplan writes: "As Freud pointed out long ago, how one reacts to traumatic events depends on one's individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is 'managed' by institutional forces" (p. 1). In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth speaks plainly of the importance of story as a way of defining trauma. She claims: "Trauma seems to be much more than pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell of us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available". She adds: "This truth, in its delayed appearance and its bleated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (p. 4). Caruth highlights the construction of traumatic events and

delayed experience. She emphasises the important role of literature which makes it easy for us to bear witness to events that cannot be totally recognised and makes us aware of what might remain unspoken and unheard. Caruth argues: "[T]he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time. The belated event is a trauma which is 'absence' or missed encounter" (p. 9).

Iraqis are experiencing various forms of individual and collective traumas. While everyday life in Iraq is loaded with trauma and violence, Iraqis continue to oppose and dream. Erickson (1995) states that the traumatised individual remains living in the moment of shock, preventing him or her from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past, "and relives it over and over again in the compulsive musings of the day and the seething dreams of night. The moment becomes a season, the events become a condition" (p. 184).

Sinan Antoon, the Iraqi American writer, is trying to convey the troubled history of Iraq and what Caruth (1996) calls the "mute repetition of suffering" (p. 9). He is an injured author who was forced to leave his country for more than 25 years. He is aware of the suffering and pain of Iraqis who seek to enjoy the beauty in their fragmented world, which led him to bear the responsibility of breaking the silence and showing their wounds to the public.

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, which was originally written in Arabic and translated into English by Antoon himself, was a trauma novel and is widely concerned with traumatic events which emerge out of personal experiences such as death, loss, and rape, and collective experiences like war. This novel is a heart-warming and heartbreaking story, both sad and sensual. It centres on two crucial incidents in the modern Iraqi history: The Gulf War in 1990 and the American invasion in 2003. It's an alarming reminder from a distinctive perspective of the disorder, the slaughter, and sectarian hostility that came to Iraq after the alleged American liberation. This novel is a call for help against the prejudice, cruelty, domination and the mass production of death that Iraq has been experiencing for decades. Antoon's novel is a poignant story about Jawad, an Iraqi young man from a family who practised the laundering and preparation of burials. It is also about the effects of fragmented war, occupation and civil war on Jawad and his family, friends and country. The subject of the story is bleak overall, as befits the tragedies that Iraq has suffered for more than three decades. However, the accurate depiction of the rituals of the laundering of corpses, and the contradictory feelings of Jawad about his work and the other world of his night dreams, illuminate a gentler, more human aspect in the world of violence and brutality.

The Corpse Washer starts with the concept of the *Mghaysil*, the place where Muslim dead bodies are washed and cleaned before they are sent to their final destination. Jawad's father

has been washing dead bodies since he was a child. He has become a master in this profession and therefore, he wants his only son, Jawad, to inherit it after he dies.

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" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 11).

Jawad experiences personal trauma because he lost his brother, his girlfriend and some of his relatives. He is also experiencing collective trauma in the sense that he is trapped in various traumatic experiences that devastated his country. Jawad experiences the trauma of war and its results on his psyche. As Erickson argues, trauma does not result merely from a "single assault" or "discreet event" but also from a "constellation of life's experiences, a prolonged exposure to danger or a continuing pattern of abuse" (p. 457).

Jawad's personal trauma starts when he refuses to become a corpse washer like his father. He does not like to be in contact with death. The faces of the dead bodies are still haunting him. He refuses this profession. Therefore, he insists on joining the Academy of Fine Arts – Baghdad to become an artist where life is immortalised. He wants to become a sculptor who can represent and immortalise life through realistic art. Jawad hopes to see his fine art fill the streets of Bagdad. However, this is difficult in a wounded country like Iraq. Corpses are "scattered all over the streets and stuffed in fridges" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 87). He is unable to understand how his father eats, laughs and practises his daily routine: "I was astonished by father's ability to return to the normal rhythm of life so easily each time after he washed as if nothing had happened. ... I imagined that death followed me home." He also adds: "I couldn't stop thinking that everything that Father had brought for us was paid for by death. Even what we ate was paid for by death. When we had dinner that night I watched Father's fingers cut the bread and put food in his mouth" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 22). He is traumatised. He continues seeing dead, deformed and even faceless bodies in his dreams. He does not dare to tell his parents about his nightmares which have haunted him all summer long. These nightmares are so horrible that he is afraid of going to sleep. He contemplates: "Death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep" (*The Corpse Washer*, pp. 2–3). Erikson (1995) remarks, "trauma involves a continual reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashback and hallucinations and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances" (p. 184). In the very first nightmare chapter, Jawad has a dream of his girlfriend Reem, "lying naked on her back on a marble bench" and waiting to be washed by Jawad who is horrified

and perplexed at the scene. He questions her why she wants to be washed when she is "not dead?" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 1). In another nightmare, he "sees[s] two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breast" (p. 1). Most probably, this explains that she died because of breast cancer. Jawad is troubled by another nightmare of the terrifying old man. He describes him: "An old man with long white hair and a long white beard wakes me up and says ...*write down all the names!* ...I look at his eyes. They are a strange sky-blue color, set deep into his eye sockets. His face is laced with wrinkles as if he were hundreds of years old. I ask him flatly: *Who are you? What names?* He smiles: *You don't recognize me? Get a pen and paper and write down all!*" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 26).

His contact with these horrifying dreams makes him unable to sustain a normal life with his cousin Reem, who travels to Europe after Jawad fails to propose to her. Jawad falls in love with other women after Reem's departure, but he fails to reach these women because his heart is "full of death" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 123). Whenever he wants to make a proposal of marriage to her, he suddenly retreats back because his mind is damaged and traumatised. He is alienated emotionally. He cannot make any proposal of marriage to the women he has met in his life. He says: "I knew that my heart was a hole one could pass through but never reside in" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 114). Herman argues that traumatic experiences are known for their destructive influence on human relationships, family ties, and trust (Herman, p. 51). Psychologists argue that traumatised individuals have a foreshortened sense of future and they always expect to die at a young age, therefore Jawad shrinks back from the idea of marriage because he does not want to trap the woman he loves with his meaningless life.

Things are going even worse for Jawad after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. This armed occupation gives a free rein to sectarian hostility and violence. The number of dead people is increasing. Jawad thinks that his life is completely controlled by death whose "fingers were crawling everywhere" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 104). He feels unsecure and the lack of security makes him explode: "I can't do it anymore. I'm suffocating. I'm not cut out for this job. I wasn't planning on doing it for two years. I can't sleep at night. Nightmares are driving me insane" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 171). The dead corpses look like one another because the reasons behind their death are similar. He contemplates: "I was startled as I uncovered the face of one of the men I washed yesterday. He looked exactly like a dear friend of mine who'd died years ago. The same rectangular features, high cheek bones, and long nose. ...The thick eyebrows looked as if they were about to shake hands. *But*, I said to myself, I've already seen him dead in my own arms once before" (*The Corpse washer*, p. 59). Dominick LaCapra argues that "at some level you always have a tendency to repeat the problems you are studying" (p. 142).

The extended presence of trauma hinders Jawad from differentiating between the real world and fantasy. Jawad begins to feel that he is more connected with death than with those who are alive. Jawad is trapped in a place where all Iraqis are afraid of sleeping at night.

War and violence have been major themes in this novel, which portrays the influence of war on the human psyche and it also discusses the unusual reactions towards war. Antoon repeatedly expresses how the unhealed war wounds have decorated Jawad's life. Jawad says: "*After weeks of bombing we woke up one morning to find the sky pitch black. The smoke from the torched oil wells in Kuwait had obliterated the sky. Black rain fell afterward, coloring everything with soot as if forecasting what would befall us later*" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 61).

Elaine Scarry defined war as "a form of human brutality where the main activity is injuring and the ultimate goal is to out-injure the opponent" (p. 12). As a skilful artist who works to design and form materials to symbolise life beautifully, Jawad is thinking how death forms his daily life and the bodies of Baghdad's population. He is horrified at the sheer quantity of death in his country and is terribly surprised at the many ways in which Iraqis are losing their lives. He remarks: "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" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 3).

Antoon descends into the underworld where the boundaries between life and death are indistinguishable and where there is no escape from the endless terrible dreams until the world of dreams and the world of reality become so similar that Jawad cannot tell if he is awake or still dreaming. This life-death confusion hurts Jawad's mind and secludes him more from his real world. Death becomes another face of life. This is what Herman identifies: "It is difficult for traumatised individuals to see beauty in life and indulge in many activities that other people do because of the inner darkness and the sense of isolation they experience which leads them to lose any opportunity to enjoy life" (p. 49). When his father dies after the American invasion, death becomes like a monster which grows stronger and more horrible every day. During his father's life death was "timid and more measured", but in Jawad's days, corpses are "tenfold" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 3). Herman adds: "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel they belong more to the dead than to the living" (p. 52). Traumatic events, commonly, relate "threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (Herman, p. 33). Jawad is isolated in the city of Baghdad where he was born. He says, "...I felt for the hundredth time what a stranger I'd become in my hometown and how my alienation had intensified in these last years". He

laments: "Everyone in Baghdad felt like a stranger in his own country. Most people were drained, and the fatigue was clearly drawn on their faces" (*The Corpse Washer*, p.175). Another prominent feature of trauma is resignation. Traumatized individuals are resigned to what is happening to them. People who have suffered traumatic experiences are so possessed by them that they feel they are in a situation they can neither change nor escape. Not only Jawad, but most of the people in the novel are living in a stagnant, inactive situation merely waiting for death: "[w]e, who are waiting in line for our turn, keep mulling over death, but the dead person just dies and is indifferent" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 55). Another example of resignation is when Jawad's mother asks her husband what they should be doing about the anticipated war. Her husband answers: "If God wants to end our lives where else would we go?". He adds: "we will just wait things out" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 61).

Jawad's family receives war as they would receive a visitor they know well. They all live in a babble concentrating on performing their daily activities without any future dreams. Their only desire is to survive. It is not only Jawad who is traumatized by the current war, but all his family are as well. Laurie Vickory indicates, "traumatic experience can produce a sometimes indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of an individual's memory, self recognition and relational life" (p. 11). When Sabri, Jawad's uncle, visits Iraq after a long absence, he notices that this country is totally devastated. He does not hide his anger and sadness: "Look at it now. Then you have all this garbage, dust, barbed wires and tanks ... this is not the Baghdad I'd imagined" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 96). This scene recalls Scarry's definition of the effect of war as "alter[ing] the surface, shape, and deep eternity of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves" (p. 64).

Jawad's bright Uncle Sabri points out that the Americans are incompetent, reckless, bad-mannered and chauvinistic and he is certain they will make people long for Saddam's days. Dead bodies are piling up "like goals scored by death on behalf of rabid teams in a never-ending game" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 108). He says that the American invasion of Iraq encourages many extremists and radical groups to destroy this country. Iraqis are aggressively expelled from their own country due to these groups and movements. When the Americans impose their western values and beliefs on the Iraqi people, a clash takes place due to the different customs and weird habits that are enforced on the Iraqis who refuse to adopt these strange habits and beliefs. This leads the country to enter a stage of schizophrenia. Sabri angrily claims: "There aren't any women walking down the street anymore! This is not the Baghdad I'd imagined. Not just in terms of the people. Even the poor palm trees are tired and no one takes care of them. Believe me, these Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam's days" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 96).

The dictator's fall is followed by the most brutal and oppressive invasion and occupation by the Americans. A character remarks: "The student is gone and the teacher is here" (*The*

Corpse Washer, p.72). Before travelling again to Berlin, Sabri gives Jawad a satellite dish, which becomes the "only window" through which they can "see the world and the extent of our own devastation". However, this satellite increases their isolation further. Herman argues that trauma symptoms do not influence only the traumatised individual's thought, memory, and states of consciousness, but also "the entire field of purposeful action and initiative" (p. 46).

He notices that the number of dead bodies is growing much more quickly after the American occupation. He reflects: "I cannot wake up from this endless nightmare of wakefulness. Some people go to work behind a desk on which papers are piled. Others operate machinery all day. My desk is the bench of death". He adds with humor: "The Angel of Death is working overtime, as if hoping for a promotion, perhaps to become a god" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 131). The words with which Jawad ends his narrative show a great deal of his resignation and passivity: "I am like the pomegranate tree, but all my branches have been cut, broken, and buried with the dead. My heart has become a shrunken pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit. But no one knows. No one. The pomegranate alone knows" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 184).

Jawad is unable to live normally like normal people do. He tries to escape to Jordan and starts a new life, but things do not work well for him. Some regulations force him to come back to the washing place which still suffocates him. He has no choice but to accept his destiny as a corpse washer and continue his father's profession.

Traumatic events are also recognised for their damaging effect on human relationships, family bonds, and trust through breaching the attachments of love, friendship, and community and shattering the construction of the victims' self that is formed and sustained mainly in relation to others in the society (Herman, p. 51). Death is taking him to a "bottomless pit" or a formless state of the obscure that is similar to the underworld in its mystery and horror. His future seems to be fated, and he is doomed to live his life purifying and shrouding the dead in "Baghdad's stabbed heart?" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 89). In the final scene we see Jawad accepts his job as a corpse washer. Jawad's many relationships with friends, family members, the women he loved, and relatives, all disappear from his life suddenly, either by death or exile, until he is left completely alone with the pomegranate tree which reminds him of his isolation. Like the pomegranate tree which grows in the garden of the Mghasyil and feeds on the water used to wash dead corpses, he sustains his living by remaining with the dead. Symbolically, death gives him life. Like the pomegranate tree, he is alone and isolated but he never gives up. In addition, like this tree which flourishes under the restrictive arms of death, Jawad lives under the same circumstances in which he cannot survive without death because when he tries, he is consumed with overwhelming guilt for abandoning a profession it seems he was fated to do (Antoon, 2013; Kaplan, 2005; Tulvic,

2001; Vickroy, 2002). Jawad compares himself with Giacometti's lean statuary, which imposes a prevailing pressure on his creative ambitions. Like Giacometti's sculptures, Antoon's characters are discreet, abstract, ravaged. Jawad's ambitions to become an artist are easily destroyed by his duty of having to wash corpses once the war has begun; having to go from seeking a good education to becoming a permanent worker at a corpse-washing place. Finally, Antoon Laments: "Iraq is a million broken mirrors scattered across a desert crushed by Rome hooves. Blind barbarians must look for the pieces and wipe the blood off them without being devoured by the wolves, which howl and growl on both sides. Everything has changed now. The shoulder is a shelf for coffins. The eyes a well of tears.... And there are more everyday" (*The Corpse Washer*, p. 33).

The tribulations of the Iraqis during the regime of Saddam Hussien are not different from their tribulations after the American invasion. The Iraqis deemed that they would live a better life after the downfall of Saddam's regime but to their disappointment, it became even worse and went to drop further to the bottomless dim void where its end is doubtful.

Antoon describes the trauma of all Iraqis through choosing a profession like washing dead bodies. Jawad has an exceptional understanding of the war in Iraq. He wants to celebrate life through choosing another profession which describes and portrays life aesthetically, but unfortunately, things are not going the way he expected. He, like every Iraqi, does not have choices but things are imposed on them by force and they have to accept their final doom. Antoon takes us through Jawad's life weighed down by terrible nightmares brought on by the violence that surrounds Bagdad. What we are left with is not the shattering consequences of war and violence, but how the trauma narrative describing these horrors of war is an act of resistance. Jawad's tale is one of profound grief, sorrow, turmoil and disorientation. The regular shifts in time, Jawad's fragmented life, the steady loss and desertion of characters, the memorable and recurring nightmares help to make Jawad a very authentic character and his experiences comprehensible. Iraqis are suffering both personal and collective trauma from which they are not able to go beyond and start a new life under such terrible circumstances.

Conclusion

Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* is a story that confronts human pain and has all the qualities that qualify it to be a modern classic. It highlights Iraq's traumatic and brutal history and it describes a strong and profound picture of life in modern Iraq. The protagonist works as the author's puppet and spokesman who stands for every man in the war-torn Iraq where Iraqis suffer moral injuries that affect their psyches.

The strength of Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* is its representation of a many-sided and human tale of war and aggression. Antoon describes the key moments in Jawad's life. It is not



narrated chronologically, but the writer is only depicting and showing some snapshots of Jawad's family and important moments which, in fact, stand for all Iraqis who lose hope in seeing beauty in their wounded country. They are forced to live with the devastation, ruin and death that comes with war.



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