



Between Fear and Faith: Christian Experiences in Post-2003 Iraq in Sinan Antoon's "The Baghdad Eucharist"

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بين الخوف والايمان :- تجربة المسيحي في عراق بعد ٢٠٠٣ في رواية سنان أنطوان "يا مريم"

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Abstract

The current research will try to investigate the experiences of fear and faith as Christian experiences that Sinan Antoon expounds in his novel "The Baghdad Eucharist" in (2017). Antoon portrays the socio-political turmoil that ensued subsequent to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the suffering of the Iraqi Christian community. Through his characters, Antoon does delve into the themes of fear, faith, identity, and survival against a background of violence, forced migration, and religious persecution. It is expected, therefore, that the major concern of this research work will be to find out how Antoon portrays the interface or interplay of fear and faith in the lives of Iraqi Christians in his work, The Baghdad Eucharist. Well, this is the way fear becomes imprinted on the faces of persecution and uncertainty, making faith a stronghold for resiliency and identity. The importance of the study is to closely approach the expressions of fear and faith in Sinan Antoon's "The Baghdad Eucharist" and bring out from within the dimensions of resilience among Iraqi Christians in the midst of turmoil. The paper concludes by saying that Sinan Antoon's portrayal of fear and faith in post-2003 Iraq, like that which is captured in "The Baghdad Eucharist," shows deep complexities of identity and resilience amongst Iraqi Christians. It is through Yusuf and Maha that Antoon demonstrates how the fear of persecution and displacement locks horns with resilient faith, reaching out for hope when society seems to be falling apart. **Keywords:** fear, faith, post-2003, Christian, war.

البحث الحالي يستكشف تجربة الخوف والايمان كتجربة مسيحية التي جسدها سنان أنطوان في رواية "يا مريم". فالكاتب صور الضغوطات الاجتماعية والسياسية بعد غزو ٢٠٠٣ ومعاناة المجتمع المسيحي العراقي. ومن خلال الشخصيات فان أنطوان قد وضح موضوع الخوف والايمان والهوية والعيش في العنف والتهميش القسري والعنف الطائفي. وهذا البحث يوضح كيف جسدها سنان أنطوان تتداخل الخوف والايمان في حياة المسيحي العراقي. ان هذا البحث يستنتج تصوير الكاتب لتعقيدات الهوية والصمت في "يا مريم" الكلمات المفتاح:- الخوف، الايمان ، بعد ٢٠٠٣ ، المسيح، الحرب.

Introduction

The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent socio-political upheaval considerably changed the situation for religious minorities in the country, especially Christians. Iraqi Christians were engulfed by further violence, increasing sectarian strife, and collapsing state institutions, which pushed them to unprecedented levels of fear, insecurity, and existential uncertainty. This paper, entitled "Between Fear and Faith: Christian Experiences in Post-2003 Iraq in Sinan Antoon's Baghdad Eucharist" aims to explore these themes against the literary backdrop of a very incisive novel by Sinan Antoon, known as Baghdad Eucharist. Sinan Antoon is a poet, novelist, translator, and scholar who weaves together such intricate themes as fear and faith in his novel "The Baghdad Eucharist." (2017) Born and brought up in Baghdad into a Christian family, Antoon knew firsthand that status of Christians in Iraq as a religious minority and their experiences with religious persecution, torture, and displacement by terrorist groups. Having completed his B.A. After graduating from Baghdad University with an English degree in 1990, the 1991 Gulf War sent Antoon to the United States. He then continued his studies at Georgetown and Harvard, culminating in a Ph.D. in Arabic literature at Harvard in 2006. His works often drip with a sense of

pessimism about the prospects of Iraq, vividly rendering the suffering of the Iraqi people during wars and social injustice but no less from the harsh conditions that minorities were facing. This research is of a qualitative nature, with the tools of literary analysis and textual interpretation cutting through the complex layers of Antoon's narrative. It attempts to explain, through the study of internal and external conflicts of characters, how fear and faith coexist and constitute the lived experience of Iraqi Christians in that tumultuous period. It is going to identify major themes of struggle for identity, impact of prejudice by society, and complexities within the multicultural Iraqi society. This research, in this respect, will add deeper insights into the multi-dimensional challenges that beset religious minorities in these war-torn areas and the enduring resilience and faith characteristic of journeys. Re-centering a sitting Baghdad Eucharist within broader contexts of post-2003 Iraq is more nuanced, allowing the narratives of the Christian communities to shed some light, therefore enriching the discourse of religious and cultural survival amidst adversities.

Literature Review

The repetition and compulsiveness of trauma, dissociation of the psyche, repressed memory, unspeakability of traumatized experiences, loss of identity, distortion of the present, and fleeing from the past are characteristic symptoms in the Iraqi war narratives. However, there are only a very few themes, and the analysis of Iraqi literature, at the level of social trauma, remains barely touched. Research regarding the influence of social trauma in Iraqi narratives is one of the rarest things that is discussed. Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon" by Habeeb (2015) comments that the literary representation of traumatic experiences in Iraqi fiction is scant in comparison with the copious literature that came from Western crises. The researcher examines the traumatic experience described in the works of Sinan Antoon, from "Ijaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody" to "The Corpse Washer," which attempts an account of physical and psychic traumas of war and prolonged oppression in Iraq. Other research pieces have focused on the traumatization of Iraqi women. One such earlier research is that by Al-taleb, 1983, about literature on war in Iraqi fiction, where he traces the history from the Second World War to the Iran-Iraq War and identifies the consequence of wars on Iraqi people. Saadawi 2014 "Frankenstein in Baghdad" is a western narrative of "Frankenstein" duplicated for an Iraqi setting. Here, Hadi, a junk dealer, collects body parts of suicide bomb victims in order to make a corpse find peace in the afterlife. While the causes in the vivid descriptions are regarded as trauma, it is often overlooked—the trauma itself and the consequences. Firmani writes in 2018 about the dark shoals of Iraqi war fiction and refers to the pervasiveness of death, and how it merges with gothic, surrealist, and absurdist elements. Masmoudi, based on 2015, surveys Iraqi war narratives created since 2003, focusing on the terror of tyranny and the brutalities of war and occupation, with special emphasis on those expatriate male authors. O'Gorman (2015) does discuss the fragmented nature of fiction reflecting disrupted reality, multidirectional memory, and leaves room for multiple readings. He discusses novels, especially Don DeLillo's "Point Omega" in 2010, Hari Kunzru's "Gods Without Men" in 2011, and Kevin Powers' "The Yellow Birds" in 2012, highlighting connections between American foreign policy post-9/11 and Middle Eastern violence. Despite the occurrence of such themes, little attention has been given to the analysis of Iraqi literature through the angle of social trauma, more so in regards to fear and faith. Few studies have considered the implications that social trauma has on Iraqi narratives. This paper will explore the Christian Experiences of fear and faith in post-2003 Iraq in Antoon's "The Baghdad Eucharist."

Methodology

The methodology for the paper "Between Fear and Faith: Christian Experiences in Post-2003 Iraq in Sinan Antoon's Baghdad Eucharist" is qualitative. This way, one is best able to analyze the complex and nuance-filled experiences of Iraqi Christians specified in the narrative of Antoon. Textual interpretation and literary analysis will delve into the themes of fear and faith within the novel. The focus of this paper shall be primary data, consisting of extracts from the text in the form of passages in the Baghdad Eucharist that will be selected accordingly vis-à-vis the themes previously listed: fear, faith, trauma, identity, and cultural conflict. The secondary sources include scholarly articles, literary critiques, and historical texts that might be beneficial to shed light and provide examples to support the analysis. One combines thematic analysis with a close reading of the chosen text. Under the thematic analysis, codes shall be identified for the recurring themes and motifs to be identified that deal with the experience of fear and faith. In a way, this involves how they come out in character interactions, thoughts, and dialogues. Selected passages in the text will also undergo a close reading to unravel the deeper meanings and implications. This means looking closely at Antoon's detailed employment of literary devices, including symbolism, metaphors, and narrative structure, through which he conveys the mental and emotional states of the characters.

Result and Discussions

In giving his opinion about these changes, Yusuf remarks, "Ultimately, the important thing is that all prayers reach God, regardless of language and religious school" (Antoon, 2017,p. 13). The story shows how two common facets of the Christian experience in Iraq—fear and faith—interweave in Yusuf's experiences. The security-related closings of the pub and the Chaldean church—places of familiarity—bring together for Iraqi Christians the threats, uncertainty, and dislocation. At the same time, Yusuf stands firm in his strong belief in the universal power of prayer, exemplifying resilient faith that overcomes adversity. His story thus serves as an epitome of the continuing struggle of Iraqi Christians to maintain identity and faith amidst so much hardship and social upheaval. The novel, however, juxtaposes Yusuf's optimism with Maha's pessimism regarding contemporary events and the prospects of Iraq. "The Muslims want the country all to themselves," (Antoon, 2017,p.26) Maha says, and there is so much fear trusts forth from her experience of Christians in Iraq. Indeed, it is an intensive articulation of the marginalization, insecurity, and threat narrative experienced by Iraq's Christian community within the context of wider societal tumult. This fear is further compounded by historical and contemporary realities of violence and discrimination that shape Maha's perception of her own identity and place in Iraqi society. The account of Antoon illustrates the combination of fear and faith he had to create the experiences and views of Iraqi Christians. On the other hand, it emphasized their hope, spite of all odds, for peace and co-existence amidst persecution and insecurity. Yusuf is more optimistic than Maha as his roots lie more in Iraq and has more memories of peaceful co-existence. An elderly grey-haired man, he has witnessed decades of Iraqi history and remembers the times of harmony, longing for their return. Yusuf is deeply conscious "...of Iraq's complex historical make-up...and of the Christians' longevity, stretching back centuries before the Muslim invaders" (Antoon, 2017,p. 26). Hence his statement, "We have been here from the beginning," is both a testament to his attachment to Iraqi culture and an indomitable assertion of Iraqiness. Even in the heat of the battle, Yusuf would not leave Baghdad because it is his country. Contrasted against this backdrop is Maha's desire to leave and settle abroad directly after her studies in medicine - having been part of that generation in which continuous warfare and instability were the order of the day. Her impatience and pessimistic view toward life are attributed to a life conditioned by war, endemic shortages, and displacement through Yusuf's grounded wisdom. Yusuf mirrors this in his interior quotation, "Her times are not my times. Her youth is not my youth," (Antoon, 2017,p.26) since it is the epitome of his understanding of generational differences in experiencing fear and faith as a Christian in Iraq. He feels that Maha was raised in unending conflict and has known little else but war, hunger, and displacement since childhood. Yusuf contrasts it with the remembrance of better times, which he still clings to and believes in. Yusuf himself is symbolic of an enduring faith pivoted in a historical continuum and cultural identity. His hopes reflect the fact that even amidst today's turmoil, there lies within him faith that this world definitely can be a place where peace and coexistence reign. On the other side, Maha's worldview is permeated with a climate of fear and trauma from her generation. This is the group whose world remained riddled with violence and uncertainty. Yusuf finds comfort not only in his fond memories but also in a garden he grows as a refuge against the backwardness that confronts him from everywhere. Indeed, as much as he reminisces about his past and his present, he likens—quite poignantly—his memories to his garden: "Perhaps the past is like my garden, which I love and care for as though it was my home" (p. 11). Yusuf's attachment to the garden and the palm tree speaks of strong faith based on cultural identity and historical continuity. Amidst all the turbulence and uncertainty that plagued contemporary Iraq, Yusuf found reassurance and stability in his nurturing of the garden, the tangible link to a past marked by peace and coexistence. The palm tree is a symbol of Yusuf's strength and unwavering faith, showing how tangible aspects around us in the natural world hold spiritual and cultural significance in times of adversity. Confronted with such massive changes, Yusuf finds it very hard to try and make sense of the cruel reality that surrounds his existence. One question persisted in his mind, one that "vibrates" with every thought: according to him, it is "the question of all this cruelty that God allows without punishing its perpetrators" (p. 98). At that existential trap, Yusuf has maximally condensed his prolonged dilemma of fear and faith as a Christian in Iraq. It reflects his deep-rooted belief in God's justice and mercy, contrasted by the deep fear and pain brought forth from the unrelenting suffering and injustices laid upon the community. His thoughts on the extent to which God allows human cruelty establish the existential dilemmas Christians are made to face in times of turmoil. His questions, inquiring into faith amid devastating blows—parallel to the destruction of natural and cultural heritage with the erosion of spiritual and communal foundations—are heart-wrenching. Yusuf found solace within this reality in realms of music and poetry. These art forms therefore became more than simple amusements; they became sanctuaries to which he could retreat and take solace in his inner life. For Yūsuf, songs and maqāmas, a form of

musical and poetical composition, were not only mere amusements but spiritual refuges: "the chambers of my soul which I would enter to sit there alone." (p:77). It is in this way that Yusuf's engagement with music and poetry reflects spiritual resilience, testifying to his faith and strong character in the face of all that befalls him and his family. For Yusuf himself, though, it is a much more optimistic undertaking. Indeed, the old man has spent most of his years in Iraq, and living through times before the war, he wishes for those days to come back; but he is, of course, very considerably aware of Iraq's very long history, especially that of the Christians in this country—many centuries ahead of the arrival of Muslims. "The museums are full of evidence of this. We have been here from the beginning," he says. "If this isn't our country, I don't know whose it is!" (Antoon, 2017, p. 26). Deeply attached to his origins in Iraq, Yusuf does not want to leave Baghdad at all, but Maha wants to leave the country as soon as she graduates from the faculty of medicine. Maha is taken hostage with other worshippers but managed to escape alive. Still in shock, she gives an interview to Iraqi television shortly after her release. She spoke of the Christians' pain and anger. In conveying their tragedy to the Iraqi people and the world at large: "We are being targeted. Are they trying to drive us out of the country? We are accused of being infidels and of collaborating with the occupation forces, and so on. These are all lies and a distortion of history. [...] Nobody supports us, neither Iran, nor Saudi Arabia, nor America. America has not helped us. On the contrary, our situation has gotten worse. Ultimately we have nothing but God and our faith...there are churches and monasteries. We do not seek to take over the reins of power. We have not robbed, murdered or burned. All we want is to live in peace. Our religion is a religion of peace (Antoon, 2017, p. 155). Basically, fear with undying faith is in this passage, showing the persecution and killings of Iraqi Christians. Most probably, it is Māhā narrating the existential threats imposed on Christians in Iraq—from being accused of cooperation to infidelity. Such accusations threaten to kill them off and make identities and long histories in Iraq sound futile. This finds expression in the entreaty for assistance from many countries, what they have done or any extent of help given, and their affirmation that none has come to help them. All these emphasize the sense of isolation and abandonment of the Christian community. Their bonds with God and their faith are strengthened in the isolation that makes them sources of strength and resolute hope amidst affliction. Emphasis on the churches and the monasteries, their founding in Iraq—a fact of history running through the entire country—underscored the depth of Christianity in the region and precedes many contemporary conflicts. Against such a deeply historical background, he denies any aspiration to seek power, violence, or the like but desires peaceful coexistence based on the principles of peace brought by his faith. In general, the impression portrayed by this passage is the duality of being a Christian in Iraq today: fear for persecution, violence, and murder, but faith in God without flinching, coupled with a commitment to peaceful coexistence amidst turmoil. As tourists come in, preceded by a guide who has been misinterpreting the narration on the historical aspects of the house, Yusuf emerges forward to declare loudly, "This is my home and I am the guide here." He falls on the stone-deaf ear, however. The passage turns face-to-face with the tension of the existential predicament insecurity has pitted against faith for Iraqi Christians like Yusuf—hemmed between loss-fear and faith-resilience. It invites reflection on the broader implications of cultural heritage and identity in contexts where such identities are under siege. Yusuf's cry, in other words, echoes the ongoing struggle that runs many lives for recognition and survival in a world full of challenges and contradictions. The claim to the home, and dominance over it by Yusuf as a rightful owner is also fundamentally a declaration of faith—the faith in his roots and identity to be worth passing on through generations. His declaration about being the true guide testifies an association with his home, its history, and relationship, which is based on faith and tradition. This faith gives him the strength to stand against the unknown and rampant disruption that is likely to devour all his past and reduce him to a nonentity.

Conclusion

In his novel "The Baghdad Eucharist," Sinan Antoon portrays fear and faith as Christian experiences in post-2003 Iraq. It gives voice to the deep challenges and resilient Iraqi Christian spirit amidst a landscape of turmoil, violence, and displacement. Among other in-depth portrayals, those of Yusuf and Maha are used by Antoon to compile a vivid tapestry of the existential dilemmas approached by Christians torn by persecution, identity crisis, and cultural heritage erosion. One finds Yusuf as the elderly figure walking deeply into the historic setting of Iraq, embodying steadfast faith with poignant nostalgia for times of peace and co-existence. This refusal to leave Baghdad in times of adversity symbolizes resilient attachment associated with hopeful belief in the restoration of harmony in his homeland. Maha stands for the young generation burdened by traumas of continual conflict instilling pervasive fear and a desire to flee. This contrast between Yusuf's optimism and Maha's pessimism underscores the generational divide in this question of fear versus faith. Yusuf's memories of better days and his

tending to a garden amidst the chaos evoke a telling of spiritual resilience anchored upon cultural identity and historical continuity. It is a belief in prayer as a universal conduit to God despite closures of familiar places of worship, underscoring a faith that transcends anything physical. The acute fear of marginalization and violence that Iraqi Christians have to face today is thus reflected in the pleadings of Maha for international recognition and protection. It is the reaffirmation of the Christian presence through historical and archaeological proofs, something which has turned out to be a desperate call, amidst the indifference of the world, toward justice and acknowledgement. Antoon's narrative raises a poignant reflection on the enduring struggle of Iraqi Christians to maintain faith and identity in the face of existential threats. It is altruistic, portraying not only the fear of sudden danger but rather a deeper kind of apprehension due to past injustices against human beings and selective social prejudice. Amidst this array of conflict, however, faith still emerges as an inextricable and enduring element holding onto hope for peace, coexistence, and cultural heritage preservation. In brief, the portrayal of fear and faith as Christian experiences in post-2003 Iraq by Sinan Antoon speaks much about the challenges of identity, survival, and enduring life amidst adversity. It is an appeal to readers, through his complex characters and touching narratives, for timeless reflection upon faith's timeless relevance in the confrontation of unknowns, uncertainties, fragmentation of a society, and timeless spirit of people who struggle at every bend of their lives to cling to their beliefs and cultural tradition.

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