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"Iraqis and the Palm Trees. Who Represents Whom?": Historicized Narratives in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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Abstract:

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* narrates Iraq's political, social, and disastrous events taking place in the last thirty years and concludes by castigating wars and the American invasion of Iraq and their repercussions. There has been a growing body of research and criticism about it, inspired by the novel's title that overshadows many of its objective observations and aesthetic implications. The work elucidates vital themes and poses important topics; among these exist two pertinent problems:the Iraqi blurred contemporary history and its daunting developments. This paper explores these as described and elaborated by the novelist. Sinan Antoon, the paper further argues, offers a plausible interpretation of the recent history of Iraq and synthesizes exuberant reflections, information, and analyses to provide an account that stands against neo-Orientalist discourse propagated in America and across Europe. It begins with the Iran-Iraq War, ends openly with the American occupation, centers on real events, dates, and places, and addresses social, economic, political, and religious parameters fluctuated by wars, sanctions, sectarianism, and belligerence. These details and criticisms echo scholars and pundits who reach similar vitriol Antoon avers. Noam Chomsky, Eric Alterman, and Hal Brands among others point to the sociopolitical ordeals the United States has brought to Iraq. The writer fictionalizes what has been occurring by relying on poetic language and other literary devices. These Antoon(ian) stylistics and historicization of the paper are scrutinized through three sections. After introducing the novelist and the main elements of the work, the second section traces the writer's thoughts about "Iraqis" in the past; while the third section detects what befalls "Iraqis" in the present.

Keywords: diaspora , Iraq of pre-and post-2003, Noam Chomsky ,sectarianism, the American invasion

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1. Sinan Antoon

One of the few sources of joy for me during these short visits were the encounters with Iraqis who had read my novels and were moved by them. These were novels I had written from afar, and through them, I tried to grapple with the painful disintegration of an entire country and the destruction of its social fabric. (Antoon, 2018, p. 3)[1]

Iraqi in origin and American by citizenship, Antoon (b. 1967) develops a problematic identity that reminds readers of Edward Said's analogous individuality.[2] Antoon holds a position of associate professor at the Gallatin School, New York University, and is known as a poet, novelist, translator, and scholar. He published five novels, the second one, *Alone is the Pomegranate Tree*, appeared in Arabic in 2010 and its English version, *The Corpse Washer*, came in 2013, translated by the novelist himself. He is also an activist and contributes essays and articles to well-known newspapers, like the Guardian and The New York Times, and some other Arab media channels. In these writings as well as novels, Antoon criticizes American policies and enterprises in the Middle East and discloses their lies and blunders. One of the most relevant articles and the one whose contents emulate *The Corpse Washer* is "Fifteen Years Ago, America Destroyed My Country" (2018) published by The New York Times. As the dysphemistic title announces, it rereads the occupation's irrevocable consequences Iraq has been experiencing. The writer articulates both personal and objective judgments about the invasion, how he opposes its cheerleading drums back in America, signs with other Iraqis in diaspora a petition against it, and how he just three months after the combat operations end travels to Baghdad, determining to show his "countrymen as three-dimensional beings, beyond the binary of Saddam versus the United States. In American media, Iraqis [have] been reduced to either victims of Saddam who longed for occupation or supporters and defenders of dictatorship who opposed the war." This is not a passing reference but rather a bold gesture Antoon makes to draw attention to neo-Orientalist narratives disseminated against Iraqis. The impression he conceives during his

[1] All the subsequent references to this article are taken from this source.

[2] Said and Antoon are Arab Christians raised in the Orient, mastered Arabic, knew the region's conflicts, and emigrated to the United States. As Said is not a fiction figure, Antoon is not a pure literary critic. Nevertheless, they concentrate on language and its various forms. Instead of casting them away, expatriation unites them with their mother countries. They share another common attitude of engagement in politics, like the Palestinian matter and other Middle East problematic matters.

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

visit turns to be pessimistically negative: "The signs [are] already there: the typical arrogance and violence of a colonial occupying power" (pp. 1-2). In its sociopolitical argument, the article may be a short sequel to the novel.

Along with other names like Ali Bader, Inaam Kachachi, and Ahmed Saadawi, Antoon brings the Iraqi (and Arabic) novel up to a new level of perception.[3] These writers, locals and expatriates, pen their works in pace with political, cultural, social, and ideological challenges, responding to various kinds of upheavals (Al-Musawi, 2003, p. 117). Unlike almost all Iraqi contemporary writers, Antoon utilizes two languages and translates his novels by himself and in this perspective, he embodies a genuine ethnographer who has dual audiences and employs entirely two different means of communication (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 60). It might be argued that Antoon's sensibility and academic engagements besides intense expatiation make him critical and even reactionary toward neo-Orientalist discourse in the West. Neo-Orientalism comes violently in the eve of 9/11 and the term has some ramifications. But I would like to take some notions of the term elaborated by Ali Behdad and Juliet A. Williams (2010). The scholars define neo-Orientalism as "a mode of representation, which while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of othering" (p. 2). The writers scrutinize this "mode" in Iranian memoirs by Azar Nafisi, Roya Hakakian, and in Christopher de Bellaigue's memoir. They realize "ahistorical historicism and the claim to journalistic truth, two of the most important tropes of neo-Orientalism" (p. 6). Behdad and Williams have also noted that Middle Eastern writers and intellectuals living in the Orient or abroad dynamically participate in discourse of neo-Orientalism, and "play an active and significant role in propagating it" (p. 2). They have used "their native subjectivity and new-found agency in the West to render otherwise biased accounts of the region seemly more authoritative and objective." I would like to add that local and expatiate practitioners encompass heterogenous body of writers who exercise patriarchal authority in their writings.

[3] Post-2003 Iraqi novel extends lavishly and receives new impulses. It has been enlarged in form and content, quality and quantity. Thanks to various changes: eventful eras and experiences writers absorb, the long-waited removal of suppressive surveillance of the previous regime, and the wide-open space of the readership and international markets. At least some positive results of chaotic periods.

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

But other intellectuals living abroad do not follow and practice neo-Orientalist tendencies and attempt instead to correct and reject such narratives. Antoon represents one of these writers, uses Arabic and English in his endeavor, and transmits the experience of one discrete culture to another. In "اللغة هي البيت" [Language is Home], a speech given in Berlin in 2017, he speaks about the intimate rapport between him and Arabic language, mentions his intentions behind writing novels, views readers with a great deal of interest, respects their opinions, and most pertinently he writes to and about them. This vision aspires to Antoon's dialectical historicization endeavor he chooses to adopt and also breeds the authenticity of his works. He is delicately concerned to maintain

a dialectical and interactive relationship between the author and the real reader, who interacts with the text and expresses her/his opinion about it, however. The readers' reactions influence the relationship between author and texts. There is somehow a hierarchy, for me at least that I have recognized or imagined apparently in recent years. Indeed, readers are like classes, not in the economic denotation, nor may be tribes or nations. But there are those I call personally the first rows readers, for them and about them I write, consciously or not. I address them chiefly. . . For the many of them novels are much more than literary texts for entertainment only. I would go even further to say that their relationship with novels—in this catastrophic epoch of history of the region where destruction prevails, complete cities turned into cemeteries, the social fabric has been destroyed, and millions displaced—a deeper relationship and more complicated. (Antoon; my trans.)

Indeed, the "catastrophic epoch of history of the region" is well presented in the novel and as demonstrated in this paper, the novelist historicizes Iraq's recent happenings in a fictional technique. Merriam Webster Dictionary attaches two denotational categories to the verb *historicize*; the first means to "make historical" and the second to "use historical material." Antoon uses the two in the novel. Responding to the turbulence of the American invasion of Iraq and sectarian violence hitting Baghdad and some other major cities in 2005, *The Corpse Washer* unveils grotesque and bloody events in gloomy settings. It is divided into fifty-four unnamed chapters with a variety of length, and delivered by the omniscient point of view or what Abrams and Harpham (2009) call the "intrusive narrator" who modifies the work and influences readers (p. 272). The narratives, like the country and its circumstances, surprise the reader with incidents, characters, and places, interrupted by flashbacks of horrible dreams and bitter

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

condensed memoirs. Antoon's scope is therefore episodic, foregrounding the very fragmentary and fragile world the novel enters. The main narrator and protagonist is Jawad Kazim Hasan, whose ultimate profession bears the title of the book and who finds himself trapped in an absurd circle of violent and deadly times he cannot escape nor avoid. Jawad never wants to practice his father's profession in the mghaysil[4] and follows instead his ambitions as a painter and sculptor. Forcibly taking the family work to wash and prepare the deceased for burial, he becomes a human scale, an index of the increasing victims of American troops and the sectarian civil war. He acutely discerns how bodies begin to heap at his very door steps, some beheaded, others tortured to death, and the rest were anonymous.

Sinan Antoon delineates a panoramic diagnosing account of Iraq daunting events and their transformative aftermaths and impacts. The novel is overwhelmed by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Iraq invasion of Kuwait and the Uprising (1990; 1991), the severe embargo (1990-2003), American occupation of Iraq (2003-2011),[5] and the sectarian civil war.[6] Bizarre as *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Antoon renders the story of a corpse washer a book through which readers grasp what has happened in Baghdad and to its inhabitants. It adheres actual dates, names, events, and provides authentic information; this is accompanied with dialog between characters and within a character to the degree that Jawad and his expatriate uncle Sabri dialectically lend readers lens through which incidents are seen. They are eyewitnesses who mediate past and current events and in this manner the novelist establishes a medium to channel his thoughts to readers. Aesthetically oriented, the work utilizes painful figurative language, an arsenal of metaphor, simile, personification, and stream of consciousness. Engaging all these literary stylistics and direct objective observations, Antoon historicizes those events. The core of this sociopolitical historicization sheds light on Saddam's reign and the American invasion. On one hand, the previous regime's dictatorship, brutality,

[4] The word is slang and denotes a place where rituals of preparations the dead for burial are performed.

[5] This date signifies the official withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. Nonetheless, some argue that there exists a partial occupation as many big military bases, political interventions, and even a kind of mandate are still having their impacts and consequences on Iraq internal and external policies and developments.

[6] Dates of the war vary; some think of the years between 2006 and 2008; others give the year 2005 as the starting date. It might be maintained that the overtaking of several major cities by ISIS is yet another extension of the sectarian civil war in disguise.

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

and irrational decisions culminated with the embargo dissolve socioeconomic tapestry and reach right to grass roots. On the other hand, by demolishing the state power of Iraq, opening its boarders, and creating strife symbolized by the game of representative components: Shiites, Sunnites, Christians, and other minorities, the United States sets the country in a revolving stormy course that till now has been vibrating. The novelist ethnographically displays multiple levels of shock, traumatic suffering, and characters' psychic breakdown. He therefore incorporates not only these symptoms but also their daily rhythms, processes, and uncertainties lurking quite far in the dark nooks of characters' psyche. Underscoring "Iraqis" in past and present, Antoon critiques the "disintegration of an entire country" and the status quo of "the destruction of its social fabric," and then in medias res illuminates his findings.

2. "**Iraqis**" **in the Past**

Two heterogeneous figures act as mouthpieces for the novelist. The first one is Jawad, a Baghdadi citizen enduring dramatic and drastic mutations within rather rapid periods. Through Jawad, the novel indirectly juxtaposes the past with the present and offers a lament that Iraqi institutions and infrastructure have strong and steady bases but with wars and sanctions the country piecemeal loses its abilities and resources whether physically or not. The eighties of the previous century witness a huge leap in all sectors and Jawad is well aware of demonstrating how schools and universities have good lecturers and equipped with all needed materials; infrastructures foster and facilitate progress and prosperity in all veins of life, albeit the war was going on. Jawad's family consists of parents and children. Jawad is the second child and has an elder brother and a sister, Shayma' whom readers meet at the very end of the novel. The family belongs to the middle class, the father works, the mother takes care of the house, and the boys are excellent in school. Jawad's well studying achievement in the countrywide baccalaureate exam is 87.7 and then earns a degree in Academy Fine Arts; his brother Amer's is 90 percent and graduates from a medical school and becomes a physician. This may be seen as a reference, a marker recording the perspectives of ordinary people. The image of sons here is ambitious, educated, and advanced—the result of stability and progress of previous decades.

As they grow up, Iraq's dilemmas grow up too. Regimentation of the 1980s posits the Zeitgeist of the country and underwrites negative accretions. Jawad's brother is killed in war with Iran: "the martyr Doctor Ameer Kazim Hasan, died in the battles to liberate al-

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

Faw" just four months before the war is over (Antoon, 2013, p. 12).[7] Ameer's death is both tragic of a death of a person and also a loss of a "Doctor" the country soon needs. Nevertheless, the worse looms large. After invading Kuwait and in order to secure the eastern boarders, Saddam acquiesces to Iranian demands and conditions for which he started the war. Upon hearing this news, Jawad's father "punched the table and shouted: 'why the hell did we fight for eight years then and what in hell did Ammoury [Ameer] die for?'" (p. 13). This verbal and physical nervous behavior is no exaggeration; the father's question exemplifies Antoon's historicized dialectic that not only assesses the rational purpose behind the war with Iran, but most pointedly the attacking and occupying another neighbor country. Repercussions of invading Kuwait prove to be decisive in undermining social, political, economic, and cultural strengths.

For good reasons, the novelist emphasizes the huge impact of the embargo U.S. administration imposed on people. "The embargo suffocated us" and elsewhere is stressed how "the embargo had dealt a severe blow to political activism because it had destroyed the entire social fabric," as the novelist puts it (pp. 83; 89). He illustrates how this single change has transformed Iraqis into toiling people hard to "imagine" and even believe. In those years Jawad cannot make any use of his artistic works, and after a short period of employment in Ba'quba (a city in eastern Baghdad), he realizes how he is "so naïve as to nurture the illusion that [he] could make a living as an artist, especially during the years of the embargo" (p. 79). Watching the state of arts deteriorated and his income decreased, he is forced to work in painting houses. A miscellany of boredom and frustration surrounds him in the late 1990s, especially he and his colleagues are now painting the houses of "the nouveaux riches who [have] acquired obscene amounts of wealth by exploiting the embargo." For long and difficult years Jawad forsakes arts and main colors he uses have been two or three ones of "[p]ale colors on cold and monotonous surfaces. Surfaces without details or surprises." The narration now reflects the very triviality of life itself: "[a]t times a stupid fly would buzz into the sticky surface of paint and struggle there for a few seconds before dying." The novelist employs no euphemism but the emblem of the fly and death to name man and life during sanctions.

Noam Chomsky (2011) rebuts the declared reasons behind severe economic sanctions. America is the first power ensures the issuing economic punishments. He argues that the U.N. managed to respond to Iraq's invasion because the United States permitted it, and adds the

[7] All the subsequent references to the novel are taken from this book.

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

"unprecedented severity of the UN sanctions was the result of intense US pressure and threats. The sanctions had an unusually chance of working" (*How the World*, p. 47). In another place, Chomsky outlines the extreme consequences of American sanctions and draws a picture of Iraq *The Corpse Washer* asserts. Besides "killing hundreds of thousands of people," Chomsky writes, "the country has the weakest economy and the weakest military force in the region" (*Ambition*, 2005, pp.27-28). Stopping the embargo is a sine qua non for normal life in Iraq. Thus, Jawad's fate during the embargo defines different generations of Iraqis who, to cope with new sordid conditions, unwillingly change their professions, forget their dreams, living on the edge of life they cannot alter but accept. Furthermore, it is not about a new craft to learn or a dream to put aside, but it is about altering lifestyle, accepting new conditions, making new relationships, and continuing not for the sake of a better life but just to survive the very day, each day. Sinan Antoon underscores impacts of the 1990s and equates them with the civil war both America engenders.

"Iraqis" in the past are also seen from an expatriate's spectrum. Sabri is the novelist's second mouthpiece after Jawad, but with some differences. Jawad typifies a local eyewitness, young and somehow romantic, and a victim of Saddam's regime, the occupation's, and sectarian violence; Sabri is an outside observer, a veteran, pragmatic, realistic, and a victim of the regime. He is a "jovial man" and "obsessed with" soccer. But his political affiliation compels him to flee. He affiliated with Communist party that was banned in pre-2003 Iraq. "While doing my homework," Jawad retells a conversation between his parents,

I heard on the nightly news that a number of Communist officers in the army had been executed. I heard Father tell my mother, 'That's the fate of Sabri's people. They won't leave any of them alive. Thank God he escaped.'

. . .

Two years later, when I was in middle school, we were all given papers to fill out to join the Ba'th Party. (p. 82)

This handing out of "papers" to be filled is authentic for Iraq used to these exercises. Moreover, Sabri's anecdote is also a typical Iraqi/Oriental one: he leaves Iraq and begins expatriate life—diaspora he has no other option but to choose. Two destinations he selects—namely, Lebanon and Yemen which turn not good choices either. Antoon ascribes to central Oriental places dangerous and critical environments. As it is explained below, Sabri's final diasporic station in Berlin has been an obligation due to Arab regional situations and

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

their geopolitical and sociopolitical turmoil. He first goes to Beirut and sends letters asking about the family, but he once makes a phone call that leads to the interrogation of Jawad's father in the directorate of secret police for three hours. Immediately Sabri is lettered by Jawad's father asking him not to call again ever (p. 83). He does not stay for long in Lebanon and travels to Aden, employed as a teacher, and soon has to leave because of the eruption of a civil war there. Eventually Sabri has "to go to Germany, where he [is] given asylum. He would send us money from time to time, especially in the 1990s." He settles in Berlin, masters German, and works as a translator for an Arabic-language German satellite channel.

Right in early weeks of the occupation, Sabri visits Baghdad and observes recent occurrences. The New York Times article mentions this same information in which three months after the invasion, Antoon returned to Iraq for the first time since 1991 (p. 1). To Sabri Baghdad appears a new city and he lists the irreversible aftermaths of the embargo in the following lines.

'I used to follow the news about Iraq day by day on the radio, newspapers, TV, and recently on the Internet. I never missed a piece of news. I knew the embargo had destroyed the country, but it's difficult when you see it with your own eyes. It's shocking. The entire country and every one in it are tired. I mean even right here in Karrada. Wasn't this the most beautiful neighbourhood? Look at it now. Then you have all this garbage, dust, barbed wires, and tanks. There aren't any women walking down the street anymore! This is not 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. Believes me, these Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam's days.' (p. 96)

The quote combines chaotic and dirty situations of Baghdad with the American occupation. This duality of chaos and U.S. military presence renders the United States the main cause of what Baghdad and its people suffer. Moreover, the writer's comment should also be understood as a double edge severe criticism: American administration commits horrible crimes against Iraqi people and their state twice, one by the embargo and the other by the invasion. In other words, the embargo Americans enforce on Iraqis Chomsky ironically discovers has targeted not Saddam's regime but the people for U.S. punishes Saddam for his crimes by victimizing Iraqis and strengthening Saddam in building new palaces and monuments to himself from smuggling and other operations of the World Food Program (*Hegemony*, 2004, pp. 17, 128). Like Anton, Chomsky is

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

concerned about the people and not the leadership. Walking in streets of Karrada[8] and recognizing the urban landscape with all its dirt and troops, weapons, and tanks, Sabri envisages a scene no one can ignore or deny—public disillusionment, "long for Saddam's days," and resentment at American administration and its false allegations of rebuilding Iraq and stabilizing it—democracy does not emerge from tanks nor can be imported oversees. Furthermore, "I never thought that Iraq," the novelist declares in The New York Times, "could ever be worse than it was during Saddam's reign, but that is what America's war achieved and bequeathed to Iraqis" (p. 3).

3. "**Iraqis**" **in the Present**

The Corpse Washer follows Jawad's trajectory and surroundings from his youth and up to maturity. This trace is interwoven with Jawad's struggle as he tries to hold his ground, keep his place within the checkered atmosphere of horrible processes of social, cultural, political, and ideological mutations. The second major wave after the embargo and the one that derives tsunamic alternations—the "destruction of the present"—is the American invasion. The novelist distances himself from political and ideological discourse George W. Bush administration forged to justify the war; nor exposes he any hint or gesture of the fudged rhetoric of War on Terror and democracy.[9] He encourages, however, readers to comprehend what ordinary Iraqis believe about the invasion. Gradually but steadily the work prepares readers for this revelation, which becomes as the novel itself episodic and abrupt. These two characteristic features are essential because they mirror the very state Iraq has had: swift events, huge consequences, and too little logicality and rationalization. In dialog between Jawad and his parents Antoon depicts the atmosphere of what to be done in the eve of the war.

In the winter of 2003 it seemed that, once again, war was coming. My mother asked Father, 'What are we going to do? Are we staying in Baghdad?'

He said: 'Where else would we go? If God wants to end our lives, he will do so here. This is not the first war, but I sure hope it will be the last one. Enough'

[8] Situated along the Tigris, emblematic of multicultural population, and hosted historic sites, Karrada to Baghdad may be what Manhattan is to Yew York City.

[9] There has been a propaganda campaign launched by the U.S. administration, linking Iraqi regime with Al-Qaida and forging lies about Iraq weapons of mass destruction; the campaign then receives some modifications as no weapons of mass destruction have been uncovered nor connections with terrorist organizations have been found. The United States moves to speak about liberating Iraq and founding democracy there.

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She asked me more than once, as if I had the answer, 'What are we going to do, Jawad?'

I would tell her: 'We'll just wait things out.' (p. 61)

Being certain of the inevitability of the war, they are "ready for wars as if [they are] welcoming a visitor [they know] very well, hoping to make his stay a pleasant one," Jawad asserts. Having had more than one war during two decades, Iraqis now know how to deal with the coming one. Hence, the novelist attributes factual, ethnographical information about Iraqis. During the military operations, the father passed away, and Jawad with two other persons make the trip to Al-Najaf cemetery, the largest cemetery in the world (Fattah and Caso, 2008, p. 140), to bury him there. The trip is a dangerous one, because only "a mad person would want to be inside a moving car while bombers and fighter jets [are] hovering overhead, ready to spit fire at any moving object" (p. 65). In their way, they encounter some American convoy and are lucky to survive.

After the end of the blitzkrieg, Baghdad inaugurates a new chapter of plunder, "mayhem," cutting of electricity, and (unknown) mobs' looting "public property, ministries, the national library, and the national museum" (p. 71). These public places are not randomly mentioned, but rather are deliberately chosen. Chomsky reports on the Pentagon that Americans protect particular sites like oil and security ministries, however the rest of the country, especially cultural and archeological sites and public buildings are left to looting and destruction to the degree that Iraq is losing its culture (*Failed States*, 2007, p. 29). Alone the looting of national museum after American army occupies Baghdad, Chomsky ascertains, at least 15,000 of the 20,000 looted pieces vanish, probably forever (p. 30). Now circumstances develop intensely into chaos and noticing the Americans exert no endeavor, the narrator is "surprised that the Americans made no effort to protect public institutions since even occupiers [are] required to do so by international conventions." By adhering to international conventions, the novelist vividly illuminates how the United States of America lets things take care of themselves, secures no place other than those it chooses for military and economic purposes, and delivers Iraqis to their upcoming disasters: absence of public services, upheavals, insecurity, and a civil war. American carelessness and the intentional occupation the country without a clear and feasible plan to stabilize it in its post-Saddam's regime, trigger a chain of rising, accumulating degrading events. With an ethnographical reference, Jawad's mother alludes partially to this when she criticizes the United States. Three months after the invasion,

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Jawad's mother is "fluttering her hand fan, saying: 'We thought the Americans would fix the electricity. How come they've only made things worse?' The absurdity of the situation could be expressed only with equal absurdity" (p. 83). Furthermore, they remain still and do nothing, and as Hal Brands (2008) has inferred, years following March 2003, the Iraq war provided exactly this opportunity. Jihadists from across the Middle East streamed into Iraq, in some cases joining the growing Sunni insurgency (p. 320).

The novel indicates how the Americans bomb sites that are neither military bases nor containing so called weapons of mass destruction. A relative of Jawad is a co-owner of a restaurant American troops destroyed. Sarcastically, Abu Ghayda mocks the air strikes by suggesting "the hot spices and pickled mango he used in his falafel sandwiches were at the top of the Pentagon's list of weapons of mass destruction that threatened the world" (p. 139). Upon losing his restaurant, Abu Ghayda goes to seek job at the Ministry of Interior at Al-Nusoor Square, but a suicide bomber blows himself up, taking with him the poor man and many others—another actual attack. The "absurdity" of America's claim of entrenching democracy in the Middle East, starting with Iraq many pundits and intellectuals refute and dismiss. Chomsky (2005) disarticulates the American project in Iraq, and believes that:

as the pretexts for the invasion of Iraq have collapsed—no weapons of mass destruction, no Al Qaeda tie to Iraq, no connection between Iraq and 9/11—Bush's speechwriters [have] to conjure up something new. So they conjure up his messianic vision to bring democracy to the Middle East. . . . the critics who say that the vision is noble, inspiring, but we have to be more realistic, face the fact that it's beyond our reach, that Iraqi culture is deficient, and so on. Is there anything new about this debate? Nothing at all. . . The French carrying out a 'civilizing mission,' Mussolini was nobly uplifting the Ethiopians. If we had records from Genghis Khan when he was massacring tens of millions of people, he probably also had a 'noble vision.' (pp. 117-118)[10]

Iraqis' predicaments and calamities are now perpetuated with ongoing, everlasting results. Antoon employs the nephew and uncle to debate these happenings. Sabri flies from Berlin to Amman and from there he takes a land road heading toward Baghdad. Autobiographically Sabri echoes Antoon's visit stated in The New

[10] In more than one book, Chomsky stresses not only mistakes of invading Iraq and destroying it, but also the baseless grounds upon which War on Terror has been carried out by Bush II (cf. *Hegemony* 17-20).

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York Times article. Arriving punctually after the end of the war, Sabri reveals deep concerns, holds ideological discussions with those he meets, and contrives comparisons between not only Iraqi past and present, but more pointedly between Iraqis and Americans. Through the visit, he bitterly expresses disappointment, shock, and concludes but pessimistic notions about the future. Moreover, conversations and exchanges between him and his nephew deem explanations, interpretations, and even predictions of what has been happing and yet to come. It is through these historicized narratives the real present is accurately portrayed. The first location is the Jordanian-Iraqi borders where Sabri is about to enter the country for the first time since almost three decades. "We entered Iraq," he tells Jawad, "at dawn and it was a painful sight" (p. 85). The first phrase he articulates to summarizes his initial impression about Iraq is "a painful sight" that will be repeated throughout his visit. "The man welcoming me back to my country after all these years of wandering and exile was an American soldier who told me: 'Welcome to Iraq!' Can you imagine?'" He provokes his nephew. Sabri has found only three American soldiers and an Iraqi official at the border checkpoint; the Americans decide who can enter or not while the Iraqi has just to stamp and "'there was no search. Nothing.'" This checkpoint, as seemingly with other ones across the country, lacks personnel, neglects its duties and responsibilities, and the Americans assign an Iraqi just to do the formalities—namely, the paper work. Chomsky dwells on this border issue and quotes data indicating looted materials have been smuggled in which one of every eight trucks leaving Iraq carries such materials, while the "destination unknown." Moreover, the invasion that should prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, Chomsky explains, has been focused on a country that has none of these, yet helps underwrite terrorists the means to develop those fatal weapons. He elaborates his arguments with remarks of a terrorism specialist Daniel Benjamin's who warns against opportunities terrorist organizations might have through "market for unconventional weapons," a truism Chomsky confirms with reports of looting Iraqi nuclear sites (*Failed States*, p. 29; *Hegemony*, p. 123). Besides spotting ominous gathering sceneries that will soon blast into a sectarian war because neighboring countries typify clashing and opposite Islamic sects, Sinan Antoon indicates that groups of these countries can now roam Iraq easily and effortlessly; those "'coming now from Syria, Saudi Arabia, or Iran can enter.'" The narrative accuses another factor; an Iraqi official demands some money, yet Jawad clarifies his uncle that the "bribery had become endemic during

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the last years of the embargo and now [is] part of any transaction." Uncle Sabri's reply alarmingly defines levels of hopelessness and disbelief about the entire American enterprise.

He said this [is] a process of erasure. Dictatorship and embargo had destroyed the country. Now we [have] entered the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all. He [takes] out his passport and [says] that even the name of the state no longer exists. The stamp simply [reads], 'Entry-Traybeel Border Point.' As if Iraq [has] been wiped off the map. (pp. 85-86)

The principal hub for Sabri is the capital where he goes to main centers and neighborhoods. He meets Jawad's mother who reproaches Iraqis for looting and damaging public property and buildings. But Sabri explains her that even Europeans steal and destroy when there are no police and law, and Iraqis did not always commit such acts and the consequences of the embargo and the dictatorship contribute to these shameful works and behaviors. Moreover, "'Europeans were never subject to an embargo which starved them and took them back a hundred years. They didn't have a dictator who put his name on everything so that there was no longer any difference between public property and him.'" Sabri supports the argument by another crucial factor which lies with the U.S. for it "'helped rebuild Germany after the war with the Marshall Plan'" fails, however, to do the same to Iraq.

Jawad accompanies his uncle to various places in Baghdad and neither one of them conceives the increasing and qualitative violence and terror are temporary or casual. They pronounce Antoon's justifiable pessimism. Visiting Baghdad's intellectual popular center in Al-Mutanabbi Street, initiating a sociopolitical conversation with a young bookseller, Sabri discusses the performance of the Communist Party and after this opens a topic that till now resonates throughout Iraq's contemporary history: sectarianism versus secularism. Sabri asks the bookseller his opinion about

the rise of sectarian discourse and how religious thinking had stuck deep roots during the years of the embargo. The man responded that compared with other countries in the region, the history of secularism in Iraq was well known, and that religious parties had no solutions to offer, just obscurantism. Islamic movements had failed anyway in the Arab world, he said.

A devout man who was listening to the conversation started to argue with the young man. (p. 89)

The last line above remarks a skirmish between two men, but this is not a passing gesture. It worryingly predicts a huge, unbridgeable

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

gap among Iraqis about secular and religious ideology and this, as the incidents have been unmasking, is constant strife. Sabri deems the young man too optimistic, and hence mistaken for the new Iraq spares no place to secular parties and their dicourses have no chance to exist, let alone thrive, and pins it down to a nexus of the embargo and the occupation in the following lines:

not just an occupation but the destruction of a state more than eighty years old. War and occupation [are] the final blows, but the process had begun with the destruction of the infrastructure during the 1991 war. Then there was the embargo, which had destroyed the social fabric, and now the void created by the occupation [is] being filled by these sectarian parties because they [have] institutions. Their rhetoric [touch] people's hearts and they [know] how to exploit the political climate. (p. 90)

Although the regime had already displaced opposing parties, executed most of opponents, and consequently created a sociopolitical breach, the American aggression drives the political and ideological settings to collapse. Neither a state nor citizenship exists anymore and with the absence of secular parties and other grassroots movements, sectarian and ethnic trends seize the opportunity. Religious factions soon found their political wings and disguisedly join politics in the name of religion and people, pursuing carpe diem caprice. After the fall of the regime, the American administration camouflages its mistakes by another bigger one in forming the Governing Council which is "a hodgepodge of names supposedly representing the spectrum of Iraqi society, but we [have] never heard of most of them. What they [have] in common [is] that each name [is] preceded by its sect: Sunni, Shia, Christian . . . We [are] not accustomed to such a thing" (pp. 91-92). So vital this inaugurating occasion is that Antoon repeats his "fear" in The New York Times and fathoms the dismantlement of new Iraq has purposefully been organized by founding this Council by Paul Bremer III. Antoon decries that:

names of its members [are] each followed by their sect and ethnicity. Many of the Iraqis we [speak] to on that day [are] upset with institutionalized of an ethno-sectarian quota system. Ethnic and sectarian tensions already existed, but their translation into political currency [is] toxic. Those unsavory characters on the governing council, most of whom [are] allies of the United States from the preceding decade, [go] on to loot the country, making it one of the most corrupt in the world. (p. 2)

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

The arena is now having its main players whose platforms of strife, clashes, and conflicts have been established too. It is a matter of time for the civil war to arrive.

Sabri returns to Germany and publishes an article online. Its metaphorical title ethnographically yields a domestic affinity between Iraqis and the palm trees. Both stand upright, face difficulties, yet endure different processes of uprooting, displacements, killing, and exiling. "A Lover Pauses before Iraq's Ruins" is the title of the essay that combines palm trees with the affliction Iraqis now have. Using figurative parlance, Sabri semantically diagnoses the present "destruction" of Iraq and draws a domestic and environmental analogy.

Iraqis and palm trees. Who resembles whom? . . . Some have their fronds burned. Some have been beheaded. Some have had their backs broken by time, but are still trying to stand. Some have dried bunches of dates. Some have been uprooted, mutilated and exiled from their orchards. Some have allowed invaders to lean on their trunk. Some are combing the winds with their fronds. Some stand in silence. Some have fallen. Some stand tall and raise their heads high despite everything in this vast orchard: Iraq. When will the orchard return to its owners? Not to those who carry axes. Not even to the attendant who assassinates palm trees, no matter what the color of his knife. (pp. 97- 98)

With Sabri's absence, the novel exalts Jawad. He incarnates the "destruction" of "Iraqis" in its violent daily routine and all its physical and tangible characteristic features—plain and harsh. Jawad usually sits in an Internet café and searching for information, people, and even answers to which he "had no access during the embargo" (p. 99). He discovers many of his university colleagues become successful emigrants and have published their artistic works. Financially, he depends on portion of the income Hammoudy has been giving for operating the mghaysil. Readers notice a gradual tendency Jawad adopts to affirm his uncle's thread about the role of the occupation in creating physical climates and evoking an ideological atmosphere of violence and sectarian civil war at least in not establishing security, taking full responsibility in securing borders of the country, and inviting therefore everyone to Iraq. In other words, what Sabri has already attacked and warned against, Jawad approves with real evidence and facts he presents. Numbers of death victims caused by the American troops and sectarianism reach an unprecedent scale, Jawad recognizes, and astonished by the sums of money Hammoudy monthly brings, he compares this increase of money to his father's day

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

when the income was obviously lesser. He believes that now "death is more generous, thanks to the Americans" (104). This allusion to numbers of Iraqis being killed points to the Americans' accountability for they have occupied and destroyed the country; their victims are too many and the statistics are obviously absent. "Fifteen Years Ago, America Destroyed My Country" highlights this tragedy in which nobody "knows for certain how many Iraqis have died as a result of the invasion 15 years ago. Some credible estimates put the number at more than one million. You can read that sentence again. The invasion of Iraq is often spoken of in the United States as a 'blunder,' or even a 'colossal mistake.' It was a crime" (p. 3). Chomsky (2007) announces this issue to the public, discusses the numbers of Iraqis killed by American-led forces, tries to reach a number but he cannot, and due to dearth of reported numbers and authentic sources, he assumes the catastrophe in Iraq is very massive that it cannot accurately be documented. It can also be explained according to another assessment that American military does not care about statistics (*Failed Sates*, p. 52; Eric Alterman and Mark Green, 2004, p. 293).

Despite his ardent refusal and despising, Jawad cannot ultimately avoid accepting the family tradition of corpse washing. Baghdad has been a no-man's-land with curfew, explosions, useless checkpoints and patrols, displacements, and assassinations. After Hammoudy fell victim of sectarian violence and terrorism in 2005, and because of financial problems caused by his mother's sudden illness, Jawad works as a corpse washer in the mghaysil. Suggestively the first body he washes has been a twenty-three-year-old young male who died of "'Drug overdose/pills'" (p. 128). The novelist intentionally puts this cause of death at the very beginning of Jawad's long career for important implications: drugs have been almost absent from Iraq, but after the invasion different kinds of them overwhelm local markets and make many young Iraqis addicted. Second, the spread of this social epidemic disease requires a state policy and governmental mass procedures to contaminate and fight it. The apparent truth slaps any optimism since state power and measurements are missing and people are left alone to various and grave problems afflicting society.

On the first day of starting his profession, Jawad includes the name of each body he washes and prepares, but the catastrophic truism faces readers is that "names filled one notebook after the other in the days and moths that followed" (p. 130). With his apprentice Mahdi, Jawad continues working in the mghaysil and portrays another harsh fact: anonymous victims scattering around the capital and the lucky of them are brought by some charity or individual initiatives

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

like the one run by Sayyid Al-Fartusi, with whom Jawad has cooperated. Having had nameless victims, Jawad replaces names by noting other aspects.

I wrote down the causes of death in my notebook: a bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back, mutilation by electric drill, headless body, fragmentation caused by suicide bomb. Nothing could erase the faces. My memory became a notebook for the faces of the dead. I was on my way home one day when I realized that aside from Mahdi and my mother, I was living my days exclusively with the dead. (p. 131).

These details entail precise, ubiquitous instances common during the sectarian civil war. But what fictional about them are the novelist's literary dysphemistic wording. The extract registers victims and gives rightly respect to those who may be otherwise forgotten. This recording serves the work's historicized narratives and attains facts and evidence.

The second half of *The Corpse Washer* discusses main motives and conditions of violence and terrorism plaguing Baghdad. It does so by inserting many demographical and ethnographical references the novelist conveys to his (dual) readers. Though Baghdad is the central focus, circumstances have been collective and generative, that is, much of what has occurred reaches other hot spots and these motives and conditions repeat themselves respectively. Among the most devastative and fatal ones has been sectarianism. Sabri has pointed to it during his visit, but Jawad delineates its practical, daily, and tangible facade. In addition to observe sectarianism as far as his profession is concerned, Jawad also perceives it in its social dimension: displacement and hatred. He attends a funeral of one of his art colleagues named Adil, who has been killed with more than thirty people in a suicidal attack on Al-Mutanabbi Street, the Shahbandar café—a real terrorist attack. It happens in an intellectual and cultural area where people visit social and cultural activities, search for books, and meet each other. Gradually but increasingly terrorists prepare themselves to take over not only a neighborhood but an entire city and the Americans do nothing but, in a way or another stimulate this to occur. Hence, as Eric Alterman and Mark Green (2004) argue the chaos brought by America's inability to make good on its promises to the Iraqi people provided an opportunity for exactly the kinds of terrorists to take root that the United States claimed to be occupying Iraq to root out (p. 295). Moreover, "Instead of reducing the terrorist threat," Hal Brands (2008) castigates the U.S. administration for the decision of the war since this war in Iraq has turned to be "a boon for

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

jihadists and a blow to U.S. credibility in the Muslim world. The war produced a strong anti-U.S. reaction in the region, complicating Bush's efforts to cultivate ties with Middle Eastern states whose cooperation was needed to prosecute the fight against al Qaeda" (p. 319).

As Jawad's astonishment and predicament escalate, he wonders rhetorically why a person commits such a suicidal act just to kill himself and as many as possible. Contemplating and listening to the Quran verses, Jawad attempts to

find a rational explanation for such acts. I know that humans can reach a stage of anger and despair in which their lives have no value, and no other life or soul has value either. But men have been slaughtering others and killing themselves for ideas and symbols since time immemorial; what is new are the numbers of bodies becoming bombs. (p. 162)

This reflection is contextualized with some of holy verses being recited loudly at the funeral, a religious ethnographic reference. The verses tell the creation of man and the reward of her/his deeds afterlife. The strange paradox is between the deadly act committed by a person believing in these very verses. The contradiction continues; the novelist evinces another instance of how religious fundamental doctrine transforms people into fierce enemies and monstrous foes. Conversing at the funeral with an artist whom he knows previously, Jawad asks him about how he has been doing, the man is now facing a problem he cannot solve. He has to escape to Syria in two days because he has received death threats. Jawad asks him who has been threatening him, the man says that:

'Man. It's really absurd. I'm Shiite, but my son's name is Omar. I named him after my best friend, who happened to be Sunni. They left a note in front of the door threatening me and telling me to leave the neighborhood. They thought I was Sunni.'

I asked him, 'who are 'they'?'

'I don't know, really,' he said. 'Armed men who control the neighborhood and are killing left and right. I asked and looked around. I wanted someone to get the word to them that Abu Omar is not Sunni, but it was no use.' (p. 163)

As with the drugs issue, random assassinations, and terrorism, Antoon insinuates that in the absence of a state authorities, institutions, and their agencies, everything falls apart and anarchy and ignorance prevail. A person is left alone to encounter the unknown and should expect neither protection nor help, because such intimidating acts do not differentiate "left and right."

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

With all the pain, agony, and absurdity, the novel narrates a love story Jawad has been with Reem, a university student. The story has several pertinent ramifications, however. As the events unfold, Reem's fortune turns no better than her own country's. Being an orphan, she escaped her stepmother's cruelty by marrying a man who was shortly killed in the Iran-Iraq War. Later at university, Reem and Jawad develops a real relationship that ends in their engagement. After so wonderful times, Reem suddenly disappears and Jawad has been left but with bewilderment and confusion. Afterward he receives a letter from Reem telling him that she has travelled with her father to Jordan for medical treatment, and has been diagnosed with cancer and her dearest part has been taken from her: "[t]hey took that breast away from me and it is no longer part of my body. . . the doctor back in Baghdad said that cancer rates have quadrupled in recent years and it might be the depleted uranium used in the ordnance in 1991" (p. 114). The plague has become a fact in Iraq, especially in southern cities, mainly Basra. The dual lethal consequences of wars and the embargo Antoon reminds the reader of and emphasizes throughout the work. Reem-Jawad story is a typical case of Iraqis who stand empty handed before tragedies they cannot alter nor even defeat. "Months and years, passed" Jawad remembers and his "wound healed, but it left a scar" he touches "from time to time" (p. 115). The story also elucidates the emigration phenomenon that has already begun during the reign of previous regime yet rapidly intensified after 2003. Reem's family emigrates not only because of medical reasons but also because of security motives and many characters in the novel do the same, Jawad is among them.

The only way to put an end to the unbearable life is to flee from "hell to the unknown." Jawad decides to leave the country and travel to Jordan. He no longer can bear living in "hell" and therefore goes abroad, but before leaving he takes his mother to stay with Shayma' and as the preparations go on, Jawad reflects on conditions and situations Baghdad is now having. Estrangement and "alienation" dominate: "Everyone in Baghdad [feels] like a stranger in his own country. Most people [are] drained, and the fatigue [is] clearly drawn on their faces" (p. 175). It is near to a miracle how people live the inferno and getting used to the civil war that has appeared perpetual. By using the technique of illustration, Antoon sketches Baghdad with "high concrete walls and bloodied by barbed wires." He inquires that:

when would this war tire of slaughtering people and just quit? Not just stop to catch its breath before continuing to tear away at the country, but really quit. I always used to say that Baghdad in

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

Saddam's time was a prison of mythic dimensions. Now the prison [has] fragmented into many cells with sectarian dimensions, separated by high concrete walls and bloodied by barbed wires.

Sitting in the car during the trip, Jawad comes across a landscape he metaphorically retains. "The earth [is] a carpet of sleeping sand stretching from horizon to horizon, nothing disrupting it except the highway on which cars [escape] from hell to the unknown" (p. 173). The "hell" and "the unknown" are metonyms for Baghdad and the outside and alien locus alike. At the border Jawad has been denied to enter for reasons Antoon rightly states. Jordan suspects that sectarian tensions would spread to its cities therefore there have been restrictions on young men residing there.

Jawad resumes the daily work in the maghaysil. The novel closes tragically with another genuine fact of victims of terrorist explosions. Jawad's last body he prepares is a nine-year-old- boy killed "with his father in an explosion next to the National Theater" (p. 183). The symbolic closing the work with Jawad's preparations for the burial of a child may not be mistakenly overlooked; it authentically and bitterly articulates Baghdad's situation and condemns the Americans. As Colin Dueck (2006) rightly puts it, by being overtly reluctant to plan for postwar reconstruction of Iraq, the Bush administration creates a power vacuum the administration leaves intact; while enormous chaos and insecurity fill the void and become the new tone of the era (p. 161). Now Jawad's hapless life forms a monotonous rhythm of dealing with the deceased and exhaustedly coming back home. In the mghaysil he finds a niche in front of a pomegranate tree, which is now his "only companion in the world."[11] Anticipating his fate and the fate of Baghdad, he follows the washing water of the dead that ends at the pomegranate tree, and asks how the tree imbibes the water of death and remains alive and brings fruits. The hidden simile between the tree's color and the red color oozing from bodies of the victims refers to contradictions life now produces. "Like me, this pomegranate's roots [are] here in the depths of hell" (p. 184). This hellish, degenerate, and surreal setting Jawad must live with, a sequence Jawad and his fellow citizens encounter. As he is still meditating, Mahdi comes and shouts "Jawad, they brought one."

[11] This may explain why this tree holds the title of the novel in its Arabic version. The Arabic title is "Alone is the Pomegranate Tree."

E-ISSN: 2706-9931 P-ISSN: 1994-473X

Conclusion

Antoon aims high in *The Corpse Washer*.[12] It is the anatomy of life in contemporary Baghdad. Inserting objective and personal observations he already has and those he has collected during his visit to Baghdad, he fictionalizes the historicized narratives and aspires to the work the status of documentary fiction. Historicized narratives concentrate on uncovering the tale of Iraqis with its sadness and absurdity, darkness and conflict, enunciating drastic effects of the American embargo and invasion. This Antoon's critique per se has been endorsed by different pundits and experts because the sanctions lead, as Chomsky (2007) writes, to the demolish of the middle class, the collapse of the secular educational system, and the increasing appearance of illiteracy, despair, and anomie that eventually promote religious revival (at the expense of secularity) among Iraqis searching for succor in religion (p. 51). Roots of sectarianism can be traced back to long years of the embargo. Antoon delivers a clear message of condemning the previous regime's sociopolitical grave mistakes while America's imperialistic and hegemonic policies and agendas should be held accountable. Equally important are *The Corpse Washer*'s aesthetic features. They enhance the historicized contents of narration, and consist of a paradigm of metaphors, similes, dysphemism, romantic elements, and the omniscient narrator whose accounts and judgments are not only considered authoritative by readers but they also establish what counts as the real facts and values (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p. 272). Antoon's ethnography illuminates Oriental milieu and culture, and affords readers a sui generis opportunity to rediscover Oriental people and their historical facts, social, and political incidents distorted by propagated doxa of neo-Orientalism.

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[12] He wrote the novel twice, one in Arabic and the another in English, and exercised persisting, meticulous determination to retain actual dates, names, and incidents.

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"العراقيون وأشجار النخيل .من يمثل من؟"
السرديات المؤرخة في رواية" غاسل الجثث "للكاتب سنان أنطون

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المستخلص :

تتناول رواية "غاسل الجثث" للروائي ذو الأصل العراقي سنان أنطون الأحداث السياسية والاجتماعية والكوارث التي وقعت في العراق خلال الثلاثين عامًا المنصرمة، وتختتم بانتقاد الحروب والغزو الأمريكي للعراق وتداعياته. هناك تزايد في الأبحاث والنقد حول الرواية، مستوحاة من عنوان الرواية الذي يطغى على العديد من استقصاءاتها الموضوعية وتضميناتها الجمالية. أنها تطرح موضوعات حيوية ومهمة. من بينها توجد إشكاليتان مهمتان: التاريخ العراقي المعاصر بكل غموضه من جانب وتطوراته بين الماضي والحاضر من جانب اخر. يستكشف هذا البحث هذه المواضيع كما وصفها وشرحها الروائي. اضافة على ذلك لابد من التأكيد بأن سنان أنطون يقدم تفسيرًا معقولًا للتاريخ الحديث للعراق ويولف بين أفكار ومعلومات والتحليلات منطقية في سبيل عرض سردية تقف بوجه الخطاب الاستشراقي الجديد المنتشر في الولايات المتحدة الامريكية وأوربا. يبدأ الكتاب بحرب إيران والعراق، وينتهي بالغزو الأمريكي، ويركز على الأسماء والتواريخ والأماكن الحقيقية، ويتطرق الى عوامل الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والسياسية والدينية التي تأثرت بالحروب والعقوبات الاقتصادية والطائفية والغزو الامريكي. تتردد هذه التفاصيل والانتقادات عند الكتاب والنقاد غربيون الذين يصلون إلى نفس التصورات التي يطرحها أنطون. نوام تشومسكي، إريك ألترمان، وهال براندز من بين آخرين يشيرون إلى المحن الاجتماعية والسياسية التي جلبتها الولايات المتحدة إلى العراق. يقوم الكاتب بقص ما يحدث باستخدام لغة شعرية ووسائل أدبية أخرى. تتناول هذه الورقة الأساليب الأنطونية والتاريخية وتحللها في ثلاثة أقسام. بعد تقديم الروائي للقراء وسبر العناصر الرئيسية للعمل، يتتبع القسم الثاني أفكار أنطون حول "العراقيين" في الماضي؛ بينما يكتشف القسم الثالث ما يحدث "للعراقيين" في الحاضر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطائفية، العراق قبل وبعد 2003، العنف، الغزو الأمريكي، الشتات، نوام تشومسكي.