

**Iraqi Utopia and Dystopia of Immigration
in Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* and Antoon's
The Novel of Collateral Damage**

**الطوباوية العراقية والحياة البائسة للهجرة في روائيي
«عرافي في باريس» لصموئيل شمعون
و«كتاب الأضرار الجانبية» لسنان أنطون**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the complicated interaction among utopian aims and dismal facts through the context of Iraqi immigration, as shown in Samuel Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* (2005) and Sinan Antoon's *The Novel of Collateral Damage* (2016). Its analysis endeavors to examine and claim new life of immigration

concerning negotiating cultures. It uses theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies, diaspora concept, and trauma studies (e.g., Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Lauren Berlant) to explore how those narratives deal with displacement, identity, reminiscence, and belonging. Each book displays that, at the same time as migration is initially conceived

as a path closer to an idealistic values as utopia but the illuminated issues exhibit completely diverse. It often culminates fragmented and burdened “dystopia.” This investigation offers light on the complexities of immigrant experiences and their depiction in modern literature. The methodology using around this study is a close reading critical textual analysis and comparative approach.

Key words: Utopia, Dystopia, Immigration, Samuel Shimon, and Sinan Antoon

تحت هذه الورقة البحثية في التفاعل المعقّد بين الأهداف الطوباوية والحقائق الكئيبة في سياق الهجرة العراقية، كما هو موضح في كتاب صموئيل شمعون «عرقي في باريس» (٢٠٠٥) وكتاب سنان أنطون «كتاب الأضرار الجانبية» (٢٠١٦). وتستخدم أطراً نظرية من دراسات ما بعد الاستعمار، ومفهوم الشتات، ودراسات الصدمات النفسية (مثل إدوارد سعيد، وهومي بابا، وغلوريما أنزالدوا، ولورين بيرلانت) لاستكشاف كيفية تعامل هذه السردية مع النزوح والهوية والذكريات والانتماء. يُظهر في كل كتاب

فيه تصور الهجرة في البداية كمسار أقرب إلى قيم مثالية كاليوتوبيا، إلا أن القضايا المُسلطَة عليها تُظهر تنوعاً كبيراً. غالباً ما تُتوّج بـ«ديستوبيا» مجرّأة ومتقلّة. يُسلط هذا البحث الضوء على تعقيدات تجارب المهاجرين وتصويرها في الأدب المعاصر. المنهجية المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة هي القراءة الدقيقة للنص والتحليل النقدي والمنهج المقارن.

Introduction

New complexities of Iraqi diasporic writing show deep experiences of displacement, identity negotiation, and psychological maturation that would normally constitute an extra-contextual exegesis in a postmodern comparative literary study.

Global migration arguably represents one of the biggest pressing challenges today, hence affecting cultural productions in all domains. Especially literature, as a field of study, has been great for detailing the internally conflicted nature of migration from all sides, picturing particular moments of hope and despair. Two works

that stand as relevant discussions are *An Iraqi in Paris* by Samuel Shimon and *The Novel of Collateral Damage* by Sinan Antoon, which depict goals and hardships faced by Iraqi immigrants trying to make a journey of life abroad, emphasizing contradictions between utopian dreams and dystopian actuality. Migration narratives have been exhaustively researched until now (Al-Rasheed, 20). There is a critical research gap in understanding how the Iraqi authors Samuel Shimon and Sinan Antoon conceptualize the interplay between utopian aspirations and dystopian realities of immigrant experiences. Recent comparative literary evaluations suggest, however, that diasporic writers deploy narrative strategies beyond those of conventional memoirs to construct complex representations of national and transnational identities (Boullata, 33). Nevertheless, there has been little intellectual discourse on the psychological and literary processes through which Iraqi writers in Paris manifest the trauma of their relocation experience. Most

studies have concentrated on one narrative of migration, neglecting the complex relationship of social memory, individual imagination, and spatial dislocation (Harlow, 12). Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* and Antoon's *The Novel of Collateral Damage* differ greatly in their linguistic and stylistic outlooks, thereby challenging accepted representations of immigrant experience. This article traces how the quest for independence and security is hindered by the harsh reality of exile, thereby laying bare the contradictions inherent within acts of migration. How do Samuel Shimon and Sinan Antoon deconstruct and reconstruct their different interpretations of the immigrant experience, variously depicting utopian hope and nightmarish reality? What literary tools do they employ in articulating the dense mental landscape of the experience of displacement? With the mention of postcolonial literary theory, diaspora studies, and comparative narrative analysis, this study will critically analyze the manner in which writers

have depicted the experiences of immigrants. Drawing from some other theoretical considerations expounded upon by the likes of Edward Said as in the book Culture and Imperialism, Homi Bhabha as in the book The Location of Culture, and Lauren Berlant as in the book Cruel Optimism, we investigate how romanticized visions of a better life overseas are undermined by practical reality. We use Gloria Anzaldúa's idea to examine the psychological and emotional liminality experienced by migrants navigating two cultures.

The main objective is to mention a research gap by analyzing how Iraqi authors Samuel Shimon and Sinan Antoon conceptualize the tension between utopian dreams and dystopian realities in the immigrant experience. It is particularly to present Iraqi diasporic which reflects displacement and identity negotiation.

1- Desire Utopia: Desire to Migrate

In fact, it made to search for a utopian idea in migration - that locale from which one could escape the violence, oppression or economic deprivation. *"An Iraqi in Paris"* is an autobiography novel and tells the story of protagonist as name Shmuel. When he escapes from Iraq under the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein, Paris becomes the vision of peace and opportunity for Shmuel. In *The Novel Collateral Damage*, Nameer flees Baghdad to London after he suffers severe injuries due to the American-led invasion. Each of them saw their adopted homes as possible spaces of liberation out of which they could crawl and breathe away the trauma and chaos they've left behind in the previous countries they have lived in.

Edward Said's notion of "imaginative geography" outlines crucial viewpoints on the matter. He asserts that the Western view of the Orient has forged an image of the continent wherein Europe is



perceived as the capital in progress or civilization worthy, in contrast to a mere primitive East (Said, 19). This makes the dichotomy much more relevant to Shmuel and Nameer in that it has instilled further in their beliefs of Western superiority and, thus, an increased desire to migrate. As the two dissimilar tales progress, though, this unattainable ideal turns out to be fraught with contradictions and unrealistic expectations.

Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" further illuminates this interplay: people usually maintain desires or fantasies that they think will lead to a happy outcome, though they execute that same desire in processes that produce their unhappiness (Berlant, 67). The dream of a better life abroad does energize Shmuel and Nameer. It plays its part in a harsh climate by providing fuel for onward movement, yet, ultimately, it remains unattainable.

2- Dystopian Truths: The Harshness of Exile

But their expectations deferred have Shmuel and Nameer

entangled in a lot of troubles and turned their dreams of utopia into agonizing urban nightmares. It denotes what Homi Bhabha calls the 'third space,' an in-between zone into which cultural identities are negotiated and redefined (Bhabha, 34)-such is his interaction with such a host country. In *An Iraqi in Paris*, Shmuel navigates his way through xenophobia, isolation, and bureaucratic impediments to achieving personal success in relation to French society.

Though at first their hopes are but turned out to be empty dreams, Shmuel and Nameer found themselves in many hassles that transform their utopian dreams into very hollow urban nightmares. Herein, therefore lies what Homi Bhabha calls 'third space' that liminal zone wherein cultural identities become negotiated and redefined (Bhabha, 67): His interaction with such a host country. *An Iraqi in Paris* tells the story of Shmuel as he struggles with problems of xenophobia and isolation, and bureaucratic stumbling blocks as he attempts to

assimilate in the French society. It is Nameer's bitter and cruel realities of refugee life that emerged from his trip to London as the day to day circumstances of his life are spent navigating the medical care system and grappling with his worrisome legal status as well as challenges of integration even as he painfully feels the physical and inhuman burden of dislocation. His wounded body.

Anzaldúa's concept of "borderlands" provides a very good insight into the psychological portraits brought by such experiences. As Anzaldúa put it, borderlands are a complex and contradictory environment where people are constantly in flux. (87) Borderlands represent not only physical borders for Shmuel and Nameer, but they also work as mental divisions: reconciliation of former traumas with the present conditions is mirrored in this inner conflict.(23)

Comparative analysis of Samuel Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* and Sinan Antoon's *The Novel of Collateral Damage*, using

theoretical frameworks from some of the prominent scholars, throws light on how both authors reflect on collective and individual aspects of exile. The novels share in common with Edward Said in his conceptualization of "unhealable rift" exile, as this is seen in the toilsome condition, and trauma along with the rupturing of identity defines a sort of dystopian exile. This is consistent with Said's assertion in *Reflections on Exile* that exile is a condition of eternal dislocation wherein the past becomes an unrecoverable ideal, indicating the never-ending ruptures that occupy the lives of such protagonists. Further, disjointed identities of protagonists show what Bhabha defined under hybridity in *The Location of Culture*, with the idea that exilic self exists in a liminal space caught between cultural past and alien present. The authors also employ nonlinearity in their narration, a technique that echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on heteroglossia and the fractured nature of exilic consciousness, enhancing more the



disorientation and dystopia of the empirical realities of displacement. Nevertheless, the emphases and theoretical configurations of the novels differ. In this case, Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* designs themes of cultural and personal exile akin to Nabokov's reflections on diasporic identity in *Speak, Memory*, in which the individual engages with a sense of disconnection from cultural origins in the unfamiliar territory. In contrast, Antoon's *The Novel of Collateral Damage* feels much more in tune with several poems of Mahmoud Darwish on exile, especially deriving to great deal of pain from the conflict and the impossibility of returning to a homeland which has been altered beyond recognition with destruction. Grounded in collective and historical settings of exile, Antoon's narrative contests the romanticized idea of return, whereupon Darwish's sorrowful articulation in *Memory for Forgetfulness* feels that the homeland remains only a memory that can never be realized. These theoretical discourses illustrate

the layered complexities of exile—the focus for Shimon is on the struggle of the individual in finding cultural identity, while Antoon addresses the larger social, political, and historical ramifications of dislocation due to war. Together, these works enrich the discourse on exile, putting a rigorous exploration of its dystopian qualities through the lenses of both individual and communal perspectives.(39)

3- Reminiscence and Trauma: Bridging past and present

Modern diasporic literature is increasingly inheriting trauma as a multi-leveled narrative construct with multiple functions and structures which do not always subscribe to linearity, particularly in works that examine forced migration and cultural dislocation. Shimon and Antoon's proven cases vindicate this trend of thought, exemplifying how traumatic memories become prime sites for the negotiation of identity and the work of historical reconstruction (Al-Rasheed, 13).

The psychological landscape

of displacement arises through fragmented narrative techniques that reveal the non-linearity of memory (which can be annoyingly troublesome). Trauma, according to Caruth, stands for “a wound of the mind,” and neither true representation, nor honest representation becomes possible—an idea find much poignant articulation through works of both writers. (96) The narratives deconstruct the traditional genre of memoir with the help of offering reminiscence as a dynamic, contested space rather than a fixed historic record (Boullata, 15). Linguistic translation represents an important metaphor for psychological transformation. The multilingual context of these narratives sheds light on the ways in which language acts as a complex medium to convey memory, embodying what Bhabha (19) describes as the “third space” of cultural negotiation. Words take on another meaning, wherein they become vessels for shared and individual traumatic experiences (Said, 22).

Trauma has embodied manifestations in the narratives. Stressful recollections are sure not mere psychological phenomena, but deep-sited somatic studies inhabiting bodily and cultural landscapes, as Hirsch has put it. (12) Shimon and Antoon’s texts tend to register the way memories are filters through which the human body still conveys emotional remnants that span geographical and temporal distances, very much shaking conventional knowledge regarding individuals and collective memories (Harlow, 29). Both novels articulate the essence of memory in the migration experience. In *An Iraqi in Paris*, Shmuel’s youthful recollections of life in Iraq contrast starkly with his experience of life in Paris, communicating the duality of loss and desire that underpins migration. In the same manner, in *The Novel of Collateral Damage*, Nameer’s recollections of Baghdad before the war inform the way he sees things today, despite efforts to construct a different identity for himself in London.



Trauma studies would give important tools for the analysis of memory functioning in these narratives. The major figure in such a discipline, Cathy Caruth, endorsed that traumatic experiences elude immediate understanding, emerging later through unforeseen cues. Memory is synonymous with war and displacement for Shmuel and Nameer because it serves as an omen that forever materializes their past, overshadowing their present and hindering movement towards the future. (Caruth, 18). Moreover, each author adopts metafictional devices to highlight the fluidity of memory. For example, within *The Novel of Collateral Damage*, Nameer goes so far as to require a writer to record his stories, blurring the line between fiction and reality. Further, *An Iraqi in Paris* collected elements of autofiction reflecting the porous barriers between personal records and literary creation. Such methods strongly underscore the subjectivity of memory and indicate that truth is ever mediated through individual perspectives.

4- Discussion

An Iraqi in Paris by Samuel Shimon and *The Novel of Collateral Damage* by Sinan Antoon provide insights into the relationship between utopian dreams and dystopian truths in the Iraqi diasporic literature. Both novels explore in-depth the themes of psychological, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions of displacement and use imaginative narrative techniques to sample or give an impression of the fragmented and often contradictory experience, which interestingly the main characters go through. So the portrayals of Shmuel and Nameer, Shimon and Antoon basically dismantle the idealized visions of migration whereby the harsh realities of exile and trauma Legacy continue to affect identity formation. More significantly, these works challenge parental ideas of the immigrant life and contribute to broader theoretical discussions in memory, hybridity, and movement across the diasporic existence. Both



tales revolve around the conflict of idealist aspirations and grim truths, which juxtapose the nature of migration. *An Iraqi in Paris* tells of a great adventure: Nameer's journey to the city, full of freedom and possibilities, compared with the weight of the repressive gloom he leaves behind in Iraq during the tenure of Saddam Hussein. Likewise, in *The Novel of Collateral Damage*, Nameer escapes from Baghdad after suffering severe injuries during the American invasion when he hopes for refuge in London to begin life anew. The two dreams echo Edward Said's concept of "imaginative geography," where the West is conceived as a land of progress and civilization as opposed to the imagined chaos and underdevelopment of the East. However, as both principal characters come to terms with their new environments, illusions gradually crumble and open up the inherent contradictions and unrealistic nature of the aspirations. Lauren Berlant's phrase "cruel optimism" would best describe the situation since,

as hopeful optimists holding the chances for a better life abroad, both continue to suffer from marginalization, xenophobia, and creaking bureaucratic limitations damming up their trails.(19) In *An Iraqi in Paris*, the way Samir interacts with the French, especially showing the cultural and xenophobic alienation woven into the immigrant experience, brings out the grim reality of exile. His interactions with the French official, property owner, or even the immigrant neighbor underline structural barriers for integration, which makes him a permanent outsider. That sense of alienation or marginalization dwells in an internal conflict while trying to consolidate the Iraqi heritage and the French-naturalized identity, which resonates with Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space. For Samir, this transitional space serves as the arena for negotiation and redefinition because cultural identities are not fully assimilated into or entirely rejected, but they are always in a tension-filled state of complexity. Similarly, Nameer



's experience in *The Novel of Collateral Damage* highlights the dehumanizing impacts of displacement as he carries the physical and mental wounds of trauma-expert maneuvering through healthcare, legal status, and social integration in London. Disturbing bodily markings left by the violence he fled become perpetual reminders of his traumatic past and hinder his attempts to forge a new self in a foreign land. Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of "borderlands" provides a fruitful framework within which to understand the psychological impact of such experiences, for both protagonists inhabit a state of perpetual transition, caught between cultural past and foreign present.(28)

Other prevailing themes that run through both novels are memory and trauma, which become critical tools in traversing the psychological spaces of displacement. The disjointed narrative forms devised by both Shimon and Antoon demonstrate the non-linear character of traumatic memory as

postulated by Cathy Caruth. In *An Iraqi in Paris*, Shmuel's memories of his youth in Iraq mixed with his present life in Paris, creating a fragmented narrative that is a reflection of the equally fractured aspects of his identity.(46) These memories serve to contrast his current realities and highlight the pain and yearning that accompany migration. The recollections of prewar Baghdad by Nameer in *The Novel of Collateral Damage* shape how he sees things around him in London as he struggles to create a new identity. The metafictional aspects of the novel, such as Nameer's collaboration with a writer to narrate his experiences, illustrate the mutable nature of memory and the subjectivity of truth. Such narrative methods reinforce the notion that memory does not refer to a static historical record, but rather a dynamic, contested site where historicity is co-constructed across the past and the present.

The manifestation of trauma is indeed particularly prominent in each story, as each protagonist's



corporeal and psychological wounds are devastating reminders of the beyond, interspersed with their tales. Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which explains how troubling memories are passed down through generations, fits here in that both Shmuel and Nameer face the enduring impacts of war and displacement. (35) In *An Iraqi in Paris*, Shmuel's memories of Iraq take on a visceral quality, showing up in his dreams, flashbacks, and bodily sensations; these embodied memories complicate binary assumptions regarding individual and collective memories, positing that trauma is not only a psychological event but rather one that quite literally inhabits the body.

Likewise, in *The Novel of Collateral Damage*, Nameer 's injuries are an incessant reminder of the violence he had faced. They impede the attempts at moving on and rebuilding. The novel stresses the physicality of trauma as traumatic memory finds its repository in the body, which bears the weight of past experiences in the present.

Both Language and Translation symbolize the psychological and cultural transformations undergone by the respective protagonists of the two stories. In *An Iraqi in Paris*, Shmuel's struggle with learning the French language simultaneously points to his greater struggle against cultural integration. His multilingualism becomes a space for negotiation in which language acts as a medium for common and individual traumatic memory. This aligns with Bhabha's idea of the "third space" where linguistic and cultural hybridities nurture the creation of identity. In *The Novel of Collateral Damage* as well, Nameer's encounters with English speakers present obstacles to communication and mutual understanding in a foreign land. The work delves into the topic of language as a medium of transfer for memories, insinuating that language is not only a tool for communicating information but also a bearer of cultural memory and historical significance.(73)

Conclusion

This study attempts to highlight



Samuel Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* and Sinan Antoon's *The Novel of Collateral Damage* reading books that give a great and powerfully glaring evidence of the challenges confronting Iraqi citizens as they immigrate while at the same time illuminating the conflicts of utopian ideals and dystopian realities. In addition, by unpacking them in the light of various theories from postcolonial studies, diaspora theory, as well as trauma studies, the article shows how such narratives get back at the simplistic, one-dimensional perceptions of migration and, instead, encourage the ambivalence and ambiguity of belonging as experienced through the prism of immigration. Finally, however, from both stories of Shmuel and Nameer, we gather that migration is neither merely redemptive nor purely tragic. It is, rather, a fundamental endeavor—humane, full of promise, resilience, and an abiding search for place. To wrestle with these tales has the impact of getting into one's soul the multi-dimensionality of diasporic lives without glossing over some

of the continuing struggles present in the lives of those who leave their native homes searching for a better option. Samuel Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris* and Sinan Antoon's *The Novel of Collateral Damage* are detailed and layered portrayals of the immigrant experience, thereby questioning the standard representations of migration and exile. Both novels reveal the contradictory nature of displacement through utopian wishes and dystopian truths, where the quest for a better life abroad is so often undercut by all the harrowing realities of exile. The jagged narrative forms, embodied memories, and linguistic disjunctions used by Shimon and Antoon bear witness to the highly complex psychological and cultural geography of diasporic living and bestow significant insights into the long-lasting effects of trauma on one's identity formation. These works will not only contribute significantly to the wider conversation on diasporic literature but will also provide strong critiques of the romanticized



migration narratives that often dominate public discourse. When analyzing memory, trauma, and identity, the narratives of Shimon and Antoon present a very deep investigation into the underappreciated consequences of displacement among human beings. It brings into stark focus the continuing struggles of individuals caught straddling two worlds.

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