

Fragmented Self in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*: A literary Examination of Trauma and Identity

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Abstract:

This study examines psychological disintegration in Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013), focusing on Jawad's Iraq War experiences. Trauma Theory is used to study how the war's cruelty fragmented Jawad's and Iraqi society's sense of self. Trauma theory is used to study Jawad's emotional and psychological influences as a corpse washer, which exposes him to post-war Iraq's prevalent violence and loss. The study shows the deep impact on the individual after the U.S invasion on Iraq (2003), it deals specifically with of identity and culture. The research argues that Jawad's identity fragmentation is symbolic of war's social collapses and emphasizes the importance of memory, ritual, and cultural traditions in time of war recovery. However, this paper contributes to the discussion on trauma and identity in modern Middle Eastern literature by investigating how one's self is re-formed after the conflict.

Key words: fragmented, identity, Trauma, Postcolonial, corpse washer, identity, Sinan, Antoon

الذات المتشظية في رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان لسنان أنطون: دراسة أدبية للصدمة والهوية

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المخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة التفكك النفسي في وحدها شجرة الرمان لسنان أنطون (٢٠١٣)، مع تركيز خاص على تجارب جواد خلال حرب العراق. تُستخدم نظرية الصدمة لدراسة كيف أدت قسوة الحرب إلى تجزئة إحساس الذات لدى جواد والمجتمع العراقي. كما تُطبق نظرية الصدمة الخاصة بالتجزئة لتحليل التأثيرات العاطفية والنفسية التي تعرض لها جواد، بصفته غاسل جثث، مما عرّضه للعنف والخسارة السائدين في العراق ما بعد الحرب. يقارن المقال بين نقص جواد والهوية الوطنية لإظهار كيف يُنهي الصراع الذاكرة والهوية والثقافة. وتجادل الدراسة بأن تجزئة هوية جواد ترمز إلى الانهيارات الاجتماعية الناجمة عن الحرب، وتؤكد على أهمية الذاكرة والطقوس والتقاليد الثقافية في عملية التعافي بعد الصراع. ومع ذلك، تُثري هذه الدراسة النقاش حول الصدمة والهوية في الأدب الحديث للشرق الأوسط من خلال التحقيق في كيفية إعادة تشكيل الذات بعد الصراع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التشظي- الهوية- ما بعد الاستعمارية-وحدها شجرة الرمان- سنان أنطون.

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Introduction

Sinan Antoon is one of the most remarkable Arab novelists in the modern era, he is an Iraqi-American novelist, poet, and translator. Antoon. Born in Baghdad in 1976, he joined Baghdad University. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in (2003), he published important literary works portraying the suffering of the Iraqi people and changes in the Iraqi culture. *The Corpse Washer* (2013) stand as his most important literary works in modern Iraqi history, as it vividly portrays the suffering of the Iraqi people. In the novel, Antoon presents a group of characters facing their certain death. Among the corpses, Jawad, the protagonist, analyses the fragmented self after the war aims his identity. Trauma theory explains the emotional and psychological suffering that affects Iraqi society creating shattered individuals, disordered identities, and the massive cultural changes.

The idea of the fragmented self indicates the loss of identity and personality that happened after the war. Jawad suffers, at the beginning of *The Corpse Washer*, from the chaos of memories that storms him directly creating a state of inner conflict. The same time he is obliged to accept his work, as a corpse washer, that inherited from his father to destroy all his dreams. Cathy Caruth (1996), in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, argues that trauma undermines an individual's capacity to preserve their identity, leading to psychological disintegration. In a similar vein, J. Hillis Miller (1987) investigates how character development and fractured narrative formats are frequently used in literature to embody these effects.

Sabry Hafez (2014) highlights that Antoon's depiction of the environment is essential for understanding the protagonist's psychological breakdown within the framework of post-war Iraq. Hafez asserts that Jawad's fragmented identity was profoundly influenced by his socio-political context. The symbolic significance of Jawad's role as a corpse washer is explained by Maha Mourad (2019) analysis in *Symbolism and Trauma in Modern Iraqi Literature*, which illustrates how the occupation serves as a metaphor for his fragmented identity and

emotional turmoil. Antoon's narrative effectively links Jawad's individual struggles to the broader sociopolitical crisis in Iraq, offering a nuanced examination of how trauma affects one's identity and autonomy. This research, grounded in Traum Theory, emphasizes the profound emotional and psychological injuries that define the fractured self in the context of conflict.

Literary studies currently explore trauma and its effects on identity, particularly about how trauma can lead to a fragmented sense of self. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma (1994), Narrative, and History* provides crucial insights on the impact of trauma on the continuity of human identity, resulting in psychological fragmentation and disjointed memory. Caruth's thesis elucidates how literary narratives often mirror these disruptions through fragmented storytelling. Miller (1987) elaborates on this discussion in *The Ethics of Reading*, examining how character development and fragmented tales illustrate grief in literature. Miller's inquiry illustrates how literary genres might reflect the psychological disintegration induced by traumatic experiences.

Examining the influence of trauma on character representation and narrative framework necessitates the use of this perspective. Trauma and disintegration are prevalent motifs in war literature. Robert Jay Lifton (1999) "War and Trauma in Contemporary Literature" examines the portrayal of memory and self-dissolution in narratives of conflict. Lifton illustrates how conflict results in the fragmentation of the ego in his work, highlighting the significance of war's psychological effects in literature. *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon intricately portrays pain and the fragmentation of identity in post-war Iraq. Khaled S. Bahama examines how Antoon's depiction of the socio-political landscape influences the protagonist's self-identity in *Narratives of Post-War Iraq*. Bahama (2020) asserts that the book's location is crucial for understanding Jawad's psychological breakdown, since it illustrates the connection between the national trauma of war and personal identity.

Furthermore, Lutfi Al-Hassan (2016) analyzes Antoon's use of symbolism to illustrate Jawad's internal struggles in *Metaphors of*

Mourning in Contemporary Iraqi Literature. Al-Hassan asserts that the protagonist's fractured identity and existential despair are profoundly metaphorically embodied by the character of *The Corpse Washer*. The novel's exploration of emotional and psychological disintegration is highlighted by its symbolic representation.

This study builds upon prior research by employing trauma theory to conduct a comprehensive analysis of *The Corpse Washer*. This study investigates Antoon's narrative on trauma and identity fragmentation, focusing on the fractured self. Also, this study analyses Antoon's description of suffering and disintegration to enhance the understanding of war literature. Antoon's protagonist, Jawad, is an Iraqi corpse washer who cleans remains before burial.

Several Islamic groups practice "Ghusl," or corpse washing. Islamic funerals need ritual purification to prepare the body for burial. This practice is based on Islamic rites and ideas for corpse care and preparation. *The Corpse washer* depicts Jawad's corpse cleaning job with respect and misery. In addition to preparing the body, his job entails deep spiritual and emotional involvement in this culture. Battle and the threat of death deeply damage his mental health. His relationships with the deceased symbolize his collapse and inner turmoil. The Iraq War and violence in *The Corpse Washer* shatter Jawad's and others' identities. The violence uproots people, destroys families, and undermines culture in Iraq. Antoon shows via Jawad's story how war destroys identity and community, causing tremendous loss and alienation. Jawad's frequent meetings with battle fatalities show the savagery. Each body representing a piece of civilization lost to anarchy. Jawad says, "The war has transformed the city into a graveyard." "There is no longer life here, only corpses and the echoes of explosions" (Antoon, 2013, p 95). This quote underscores how violence transforms Baghdad into a site of mortality and illustrates how war ultimately disassociates individuals from their former identities.

Jawad's personal experiences are closely intertwined with the political instability he observes. His fragmented identity symbolizes Iraq's

comprehensive disintegration resulting from occupation and conflict. Antoon demonstrates how conflict erodes both inner stability and external surroundings via Jawad's experience. Jawad struggles to maintain a coherent identity due to the pervasive violence surrounding him. His occupation as a corpse cleaner renders him unable to evade the consequences of war, since it immediately associates him with its aftermath.

In a poignant moment, Jawad expresses the futility of existence in an uncertain environment: "How can one live when every breath serves as a reminder of mortality?" The conflict has engulfed us all. "We are no longer individuals; we are mere shadows, anticipating our moment to descend" (Antoon, 2013, p 121). This reflection underscores the dehumanization individuals experience due to violence, relegating them to mere survival in a ravaged setting. The conflict of the individuals in *The Corpse Washer* further exacerbates the fragmentation of cultural identity. Iraq, a country with a profound history and entrenched traditions, is shown as being torn apart by strife. Individuals like Jawad struggle to maintain the rituals and ideals that formerly defined their identity due to the persistent disruption of everyday living, which erodes cultural continuity. (Jabari 2013, p 43). This is particularly evident for Jawad in relation to the family's corpse-washing enterprise. Jawad's struggle is to follow his father's work considering it as a duty in the time of war, this noble duty is linked to religious and cultural principles according to his father. In the middle of ongoing bloodshed, the traditional ceremonies that used to bring consolation and purpose have lost relevance. Jawad considers this loss: "I once regarded the Ghushl as a sacred ritual, but it now appears to be a futile repetition." There are endless dead; the rituals no longer bring comfort. (Antoon, 2013, p 157). This comment captures how war destroys not only a person's identity but also the religious and cultural customs that formerly held a country together. The omnipresence of mortality, the breakdown of cultural standards, and the fracturing of social ties all help Jawad have difficulty preserving a cohesive identity. His identity is today determined by

survival and death. Conflict disturbs the continuity of culture, memory, and life, reflecting the general disintegration of Iraqi society.

Jawad's hands, marked by the remnants of the deceased, signify not just his own grief but also represent the shared anguish of a community devastated by violence. Every corpse he cleans embodies the burden of a disordered society, rendering his occupation a reflection of the pain that pervades all aspects of post-war Iraq” (Antoon,2013, p 112). This section emphasizes how Jawad's work symbolizes the impact of conflict on society and links his role to communal pain. Jawad's role as a corpse washer is challenging and multifaceted, with profound emotional, cultural, and religious ramifications. In *The Corpse Washer*, the profession is depicted not only as a vocation but as a crucial element of Jawad's identity, serving as a lens through which to understand the novel's themes of trauma, disintegration, and his fragmented psyche. Khalil (2020).

This study examines Jawad, the protagonist of the story, who suffers psychological suffering due to his occupation. Psychological fragmentation refers to the disintegration of an individual's sense of self, often induced by trauma, stress, or emotional pressure. Individuals who experience prolonged or intense trauma may struggle to manage negative emotions, leading to identity fragmentation. Characters suffering of psychological fragmentation in literature often wrestle with emotions of confusion, identity loss, and alienation. Jawad's psychological condition in *The Corpse Washer* is ruined and death surrounding him. He regularly engages with dead bodies, victims of war, and the remnants of a ruthless society in his role as a corpse cleaner. He has emotional confusion due to this never-ending pain, unable to connect his old dreams with his present reality.

Saeed (2019) asserts that Jawad is shown as an individual conflicted between the obligations of working in the family enterprise of corpse cleaning and the pursuit of a creative existence. He had envisioned for himself from the beginning of the book. His psychological turmoil intensifies as he confronts the grim realities of mortality and conflict. His

continual engagements with the deceased accelerate his psychological collapse which reflects his negative behavior toward those around him.

Jawad articulates his experience: "Everyone I wash evokes a similar sensation, yet each one imprints a distinct scar on my soul" (Antoon, 2013, p 187). This excerpt illustrates Jawad's increasing disconnection from his emotions, rendering him indifferent to his daily routine. The act of physically cleansing bodies becomes a source of psychological distress, indicating a profound fragmentation of his identity. Subsequently, he begins to question his identity:

"I don't know who I am anymore. Am I Jawad the corpse washer, or Jawad the man who once dreamed of being an artist?" (Antoon, 2013, p 163). This internal conflict highlights his disjointed identity and the lack of consistency in his self-perception.

The extreme loneliness of Jawad exacerbates his psychiatric state. It is hard for him to keep up relationships with the living because of his employment, which puts him in a state of suspended animation. Even while he is physically there, his career emotionally isolates him, a fact that his family and community do not completely understand. The protagonist's detachment from his family is manifest when he detects: "I look at them, sitting around the table, laughing, and talking, but I feel like a stranger in my own home. Death has claimed me too, just in a different way" (Antoon, 2013, p 154). This remark illustrates how his work's emotional toll isolates him from others who have not suffered the same horror of death as he has, putting a wall between him and his loved ones. Because he is unable to establish a true connection with people, his seclusion starts to mirror his internal disarray.

Najib (2021) claims that Jawad experiences dreams which intensify his feelings of loneliness. He has nightmares about the dead, whose voices and faces haunt him as he sleeps: "Every night I dream of their faces. I am haunted by the silence of their departure, a silence that has crept into my own heart" (Antoon, 2013, p 176). Jawad's subconscious is preoccupied with the deceased, complicating his ability to evade the emotional burden of his vocation and exacerbating his alienation from

the living. The conflict between Jawad's idealized self as an artist and his ancestral obligation as a corpse washer is central to his internal struggle. Jawad grapples throughout the narrative with the dilemma of selecting between the life he desires and the one he is obligated to pursue owing to familial responsibilities and the severe economic conditions of post-war Iraq. His role as a corpse washer, a profession linked to mortality and tradition, symbolizes repetition and decay, but his aspiration to be a sculptor reflects his fervor for beauty, creativity, and innovation. Tariq (2002)

At the outset of the book, Jawad reflects on this quandary and states, "I desired to mold life with my hands, not to ready it for the grave." Currently, I am engaged in the act of cleansing the deceased rather than fostering life (Antoon, 2013, p 63). His profound discontent with his life is expressed in this sentence. His sense of autonomy and self-expression is essential to his identity as an artist; nonetheless, the limitations of tradition compel him into an undesired role. Jawad's family's practice of washing corpses symbolizes the burdensome nature of tradition and societal expectations. His father, a corpse washer, derives immense joy from his profession, perceiving it as a noble vocation that provides an essential service to society; nevertheless, for Jawad, it resembles a chain tethering him to a life dominated by death. Jawad's identity crisis is exacerbated by the generational obligation to emulate his father's path, which constrains his creativity and uniqueness. Jawad hesitantly assumes the responsibility of Ghushl for the family upon his father's demise, mourning profoundly for both his father and the life he could have led: "I interred my father, and with him, my aspiration of ever transcending this existence." "I realized at that moment that I was eternally bound to the deceased" (Antoon, 2013, p 84). This episode is crucial for understanding how Jawad's identity is shaped by obligation. Despite contradicting his wishes, Jawad's father's death symbolizes the time he fully succumbs to his job.

In a pivotal moment, Jawad faces his father: "You must uphold the family tradition, Jawad." Your aspirations are trivial in relation to the

significance of our endeavors” (Antoon, 2013, p 130). Jawad's identity is further fragmented due to this conflict, which underscores the societal constraints he must navigate between his ambitions and his family's expectations. Jawad's identity is being reformed due to the psychological impact of his continuous work as a corpse cleaner. His identity is progressively eroded by the emotional disconnection he must uphold to fulfill his professional responsibilities. Alongside the profound trauma of combat, the repeated act of body washing make him feel desensitized.

Jawad's contemplation of his profession illustrates a progressive metamorphosis: “I believed I could maintain the separation of my soul, yet each individual I cleanse extracts a fragment of me.” “I am transforming into the deceased I cleanse” (Antoon, 2013, p 132). This quote illustrates the profound psychological impact his profession exerts on him, as his identity becomes progressively associated with death rather than life. He starts to perceive himself as an instrument of ritual and tradition, existing in the service of the deceased, rather than as an individual with distinct objectives, dreams, and aspirations. Jawad's role as a body washer symbolizes his fragmented identity. His painting is ceremonial and somber, mirroring his internal conflict on both emotional and psychological planes.

The novel's description of Jawad's work is laden with symbolism: “The smell of death lingers on my hands, a constant reminder of the decay that mirrors my own internal rot” (Antoon, 2013, p 85). The graphic depiction of rot and decay highlights the figurative relationship between Jawad's psychological state and his line of work by paralleling the latter's internal disintegration.

In another scene, Jawad reflects on his role: “As I prepare the bodies for burial, I am reminded of my own disintegration, each stitch and wash a futile attempt to mend what cannot be healed” (Antoon, 2013, p 94). This metaphor illustrates Jawad's hopeless plight in his work and the massive challenges he faces daily. Jawad has lost his battle against his occupation, which only deepens his fragmentation; with each torn body he cleans, another dream is lost.

Antoon depicts Jawad's broken ego through his depicting of vivid imagery and passionate words. The protagonist's inner turmoil and psychological disarray are illustrated in the novel's language. The faces of the deceased, their expressions a mute reflection of my own torment, are affixed on the walls of Antoon's residence, for instance (Antoon,2013, p 112). This powerful artwork illustrates Jawad's inner disarray and the lasting effects of tragedy on his identity.

A significant element in Jawad's identity fragmentation is memory. The formation of selfhood relies on memory, as noted by Laub, and traumatic experiences often disrupt this process (Jabari 2013). In *The Corpse Washer*, Jawad lacks a definitive understanding of his identity prior to the loss of his memories, indicating a profound disconnection between his past and present. His sense of continuity is destroyed by the violence of the war. His father, he remembers, "used to tell stories of a time before the war, when there was peace and honor" (Antoon,2013, p 50). Though these memories were previously important to Jawad's identity, they now seem inaccessible, as though they are from another era. Memory loss is a cultural phenomenon as much as a personal one. Jawad's memory of his father's lessons is shattered, and so is the larger Iraqi identity. Jawad is powerless to go ahead or make peace with the present-day because of the ruin of the past, both individually and collectively. This break in continuity highlights how trauma effects the community as much as the person. A type of cultural removal occurs when a nation's common identity is shattered by the brutality of war, leading to an inability to recall and include the past into the present.

Conclusion

To conclude, the concept of psychological fragmentation is knottily interwoven throughout Jawad's life in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, reflecting the larger social collapse of post-war Iraq. Antoon examines the terrible impact of war and violence on individual identity through Jawad's experiences, illustrating how social fragmentation and

Fragmented Self in Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer: (556)

personal suffering join to create a fragmented self-concept. The image of Jawad reflects the deep pain of the Iraqi individuals, it means each Iraqi individual is Jawad because of the widespread death everywhere. Antoon passes his feeling to the reader according to the reality of the society by depicting the changes of the war. The aim of the novel gives a different face of war, the writer's view, like many other novels around the world that tackles the postcolonial impact on the country.

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