Journal of Education for Humanities

A peer-reviewed quarterly scientific journal issued by College of Education for Humanities / University of Mosul

Sustained War Trauma in Sinan Antoon's Ave Maria (The Baghdad Eucharist) Fiction

Ali Hussein Ali Rasheed [1]

College of Education for Humanities, Al-Hamdaniya University [1]

Article information

Received : 15/4/2025

Published 1/9/2025

Keywords:

Trauma Theory, Sectarian Violence, Post-Conflict Iraq, Religious Persecution, Intergenerational Trauma

Correspondence:

Ali Hussein

Aliha@uohamdaniya.edu.iq

Abstract

This paper examines how Ave Maria: The Baghdad Eucharist by Sinan Antoon represents the trauma and resilience of the minorities and Christian minority in Iraq in light of sectarian violence in 2010. Antoon intricately weaves the personal and historical experiences of a family trying to grapple with the devastation of war, religious persecution, and community erosion. The novel is a reflection of how intergenerational trauma shapes and forms identity and belonging, showing the greater effects of Iraq's wars and conflicts on its social fabric. Using trauma theory, this present study discusses the psychological wounds of decades of unrest and the struggles of the Christian community in Iraq over issues of survival, memory, and loss in their fractured homeland.

DOI: **********,,

مجلة التربية للعلوم الانسانية

مجلة علمية فصلية محكّمة، تصدر عن كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية / جامعة الموصل

صدمات الحرب المستمرة في رواية "يا ماريا" (القربان البغدادي) لسينان أنطون

علي حسين علي رشيد [1]

كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة الحمدانية [1]

معلومات الارشفة

تاريخ الاستلام : 2025/4/15

تاريخ النشر : 2025/9/1

الكلمات المفتاحية :

نظرية الصدمة، العنف الطائفي، العراق ما بعد النزاع، الاضطهاد الديني، الصدمة العابرة للأجيال

معلومات الاتصال

علي حسين

Aliha@uohamdaniya.edu.iq

الملخص

تناول هذه الورقة كيفية تمثيل رواية يا ماريا: القربان البغدادي للكاتب سنان أنطون للصدمات والصمود لدى الأقليات ولأقلية المسيحية في العراق في ضوء العنف الطائفي في عام 2010. يقوم أنطون بتداخل تجارب شخصية وتاريخية لعائلة تحاول التعامل مع دمار الحرب، الاضطهاد الديني، وتآكل المجتمع. تمثل الرواية كيفية تشكيل الصدمات العابرة للأجيال للهويات والانتماءات، مظهرة الآثار الأكبر لحروب العراق وصراعاته على نسيجه الاجتماعي. باستخدام نظرية الصدمة، تناقش هذه الدراسة الجروح النفسية الناتجة عن عقود من الاضطرابات والنضال الذي خاضته الأقليات والطائفة المسيحية في العراق حول قضايا البقاء والذاكرة والخسارة في وطنهم الممزق.

DOI: **********,,

1. INTRODUCTION

The sectarian violence of 2010, exemplified by events such as the infamous church bombing in Baghdad, serves as a historical backdrop for Sinan Antoon's *Ave Maria: The Baghdad Eucharist*. This period was marked by deep societal divisions, exacerbated by years of conflict following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. The violence had devastating consequences for minority groups, particularly Iraq's Christian community, leading to mass displacement as many fled persecutions. Antoon's narrative not only dramatizes this historical reality but also intertwines the broader political instability with the personal tragedies of his characters, allowing the novel to function both as a work of fiction and as a testament to a critical period in Iraq's history.

Iraqi literature reflects the nation's turbulent past, marked by displacement and conflict since 2003. Laurie Vickroy (2002) notes that war narratives reveal trauma through "silences, ruptures, and residual marks" (xiv). These works explore fragmented identities and lost community ties, offering insight into the human cost of war. Trauma, echoing across generations, reshapes both individual lives and collective memory, a theme Antoon amplifies through his characters' struggles. Beyond documenting loss, such literature preserves cultural resilience amid devastation. By giving critical attention to these struggles, Iraqi writers are offering a window into the devastating and ongoing human consequence of sectarianism and war, showing how trauma echoes through generations, reforming the contours of individual lives and collective memory. In addition to bearing witness to sorrow, these works also serv as cultural reminders in the midst of loss and displacement.

Postcolonial trauma theory provides a critical framework for analyzing Ave Maria: The Baghdad Eucharist. Stef Craps (2019) argues that trauma in postcolonial contexts often arises from structural oppression and foreign intervention (283). In the aftermath

of Iraq's invasion, characters like Fadi bear this dual burden, as their personal losses reflect the broader societal collapse. Initially, many Iraqi writers envisioned a democratic renewal; however, the relentless toll of war—marked by death, destruction, and displacement—shattered such optimism.

Antoon's novel, part of the post-occupation literary resurgence, captures this disillusionment by embedding the rhythms of trauma into its narrative structure, as Vickroy suggests. The novel challenges readers to reconsider the communal dimensions of trauma, illustrating how Fadi's struggle to make sense of both his personal grief and the disintegration of society reflects a larger historical and psychological burden. Moreover, Antoon critiques both internal divisions and external forces that perpetuate cycles of violence. For Iraqi writers, long suppressed under political repression, the post-invasion period initially promised newfound freedom to depict the realities of life in Iraq. However, the overwhelming devastation of war, which systematically produced death and suffering, profoundly altered Iraqis' perceptions of their future. During and after the American occupation, an unprecedented wave of literature emerged, blending fiction and testimony to document the war's enduring impact on all Iraqis.

While the word "trauma" is better known to be related to psychology than to literature, it originally referred to physical injury; in modern times, it has come to mean damage to one's mind rather than one's body. Erikson (1995) indicates that trauma has developed from an understanding of " a stressful event or blow that might cause disturbed feelings or behavior in relation to a situation or condition " (184). A person becomes traumatized if their mind is unprepared to take the shock of a sudden, unplanned event. Usually, the person does not realize that he or she has been traumatized until well after the traumatic event occurred. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "An overpowering sensation of a sudden or catastrophic incident, followed by the

frequently delayed, uncontrollable recurrent emergence of hallucinations and other intrusive symptoms" (11).

Trauma ruptures the psyche because it results from the mind's inability to process a stimulus—such as shock or fright—that is too sudden and unexpected, leaving no time for prior preparation or assimilation (Freud,1961:23–26). What makes an incident traumatic has less to do with the immediate physical threat than with the delayed psychical realization of it "one moment too late" (Caruth,1996:62). This inability to fully experience trauma at the moment it occurs is the root cause of recurring flashbacks and nightmares. The shock of the mind's encounter with the threat of death is not in the actual experience of danger but in the absence of this experience at the time it happens—the fact that it has not yet been fully processed because it was not consciously registered in the moment (62).

A traumatized individual's mind is deeply influenced by past events and recurring traumatic memories. Psychological trauma can arise from various sources, including insecurity, fear, confusion, abuse, racism, domestic violence, war, betrayal, deceit, and, most significantly, the distressing experiences of childhood, which often trigger violent and aggressive behaviors in response. Reactions to trauma vary: some individuals are instantly and permanently affected, unable to move beyond their traumatic past, while others appear to remain unscathed by similar experiences. According to Berger and James, contemporary trauma theory suggests that flashbacks to traumatic experiences are "retraumatizing, if not life-threatening" for victims, which explains the high suicide rates among survivors (63). The traumatic event induces persistent flashbacks and nightmares that overwhelm individuals, preventing them from engaging in daily life as they once did. Trapped in a horrific psychological landscape, they struggle to move beyond their traumatic past, unable to forget or adapt to their new reality.

For this reason, the twentieth century is every now and then referred to as the "age of trauma" since individuals lived in a world where stress from society, fear, and the ongoing prospect of war dominated daily life. Trauma may be classified into two types: direct trauma, which occurs when a person encounters and goes through a traumatic incident. E. The second kind, which Ann Kaplan refers to as "vicarious trauma" (39) occurs when a person is traumatized not directly but through media, films, or news that described horrific incidents. As Freud pointed out, Kaplan elucidates, one's response to trauma is determined by their psychic history-often entangled with fantasies of previous catastrophes-and the particular cultural and political context within which the event occurs, particularly how it is managed by institutions (1).

Caruth emphasizes the need of narrative in evaluating trauma in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. She claims that trauma is "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" rather than just a neurosis (4). She further articulates that this truth, though belated in its appearance and communication, exceeds the knowledge given and embraces what is hidden in our actions and speech. Caruth underlines the role of literature in testifying to traumatic events that cannot be entirely comprehended; this helps us realize what may not be said or heard. She explains, "(T)he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time. The belated event is a trauma which is 'absence' or missed encounter" (9). This concept of delayed trauma reflects the fact that some experiences are elusive and, rather than being immediately comprehensible, appear much later in unexpected ways.

Traumatic symptoms usually begin with the first stage in the development of trauma responses: hyperarousal. The state of hyperarousal is characterized by a heightened alertness where victims view danger everywhere and live in "persistent expectation of danger" (Herman 1997, 35). This deep-seated lack of safety keeps them feeling vulnerable at all times and afraid of everything that could be remotely dangerous. This

overwhelming sense of insecurity precipitates other symptoms, including becoming easily startled, reacting irritably to minor provocations, and experiencing poor sleep (35). For example, First World War veterans displayed extreme hyperalertness, nightmares, and psychosomatic complaints, and were in a continuous state of fear and hypervigilance for the recurrence of danger (35–36). The relentless state of hyperarousal can grossly disrupt daily life, where the victims have to masquerade their anxiety and distress as a coping mechanism with a world that is always unsafe.

The Iraqi people suffer from various forms of individual and collective trauma. While daily life in Iraq remains fraught with violence and harsh conditions, they continue to resist and hold on to hope. According to Erikson (1995), a traumatized person becomes trapped in the shocking moment, unable to situate it within its proper chronological context. Trauma is continuously replayed through obsessive daytime thoughts and disturbing nightmares. As a result, "the moment becomes a season, the events become a condition" (184).

The purpose of Iraqi-American author Sinan Antoon is to portray Iraq's traumatic past and personify what Caruth (1996) refers to as the "mute repetition of suffering" (9). Antoon is a wounded writer who spent more than 25 years away from home. He is fully aware of the pain Iraqis endure in trying to find beauty in a broken environment. He felt compelled to take responsibility for ending the quiet and making their wounds public because he understood how painful they were. He represents a deep look into trauma, loss, and the human condition after the Iraq War through his fiction *Ave Maria (The Baghdad Eucharist).* Initially composed in Arabic and then translated into English by the author, this book explores the psychological and mental torments that the Iraqi people faced when they were forcibly uprooted and relocated during the American occupation in 2003. Ave Maria is set against the backdrop of a war-torn Iraq, reflecting on the chaos, suffering, and sectarian divides that have plagued the

country since the invasion. Antoon uses narrative techniques to make a poignant plea to mend the profound scars that years of tyranny and violence have left on this region.

Ensuing years of confrontation, Iraqis have suffered from personal and communal trauma after years of war, occupation, and civic unrest, as the novel explains. There are sweet moments; "a very human exploration and most touching emotions" are among its themes, despite the dismal reality of Iraq's recent past. Their lives have been profoundly affected since they were raised in a war-torn atmosphere, where psychological scars and emotional difficulties permeate every aspect of their everyday lives. Through its delicate depiction of life and death in its ceremonial aspects, Ave Maria sheds light on the characters' complex inner world and highlights their internal conflicts in the face of the overwhelming exterior violence.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach to analysis of *Ave Maria*, fusing textual analysis with trauma theory, specifically from Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. It delves into what happens when memory, silence and narrative intermingle in the characters' lives, a mirror to Iraq's war-ravaged past. Cultural memory studies deepen this framework, locating individual and collective trauma within Baghdad's scarred terrain. Positioning the city simultaneously as witness and victim, Antoon alchemizes urban space into both a memorial to suffering and a testament to survival, ultimately prompting a more profound meditation on identity and endurance in sites of conflict.

3. SUSTAINED TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN *THE BAGHDAD EUCHARIST* FICTION

The novel is a powerful meditation on the human spirit's ability to persevere in the face of great misfortune rather than a description of total destruction and

catastrophe. While highlighting silent, sometimes unsaid moments of kindness and reflection that provide rays of hope and healing in the midst of the gloom, Antoon's art also depicts the deep scars that exist inside Iraq and its people. Through the emotional and psychological fallout from deeply ingrained traumas of war and occupation, the novel begins by expressing the ramifications of the destruction in Iraq. The story begins quite traditionally by presenting the characters' individual and group struggles in a society shaped by displacement, grief, and violence. In addition to providing a compelling account of the lives of Iraqis living under the shadow of violence, Sinan Antoon vividly depicts the country's devastated environment.

The central character, Fadi, the main character, is a young Iraqi man who must deal with the hard realities of life in Iraq after 2010. His life has been plagued by violence, which affects his relationships, memories, and emotional state. Fadi faces the psychological ramifications of grief and despair in addition to the difficulty of reconciling his humanity in a war-torn country. His memories of friends and family, which are all marked by suffering and upheaval, serve as a window into the pervasive trauma that permeates every part of his existence. Fadi's voyage reveals a deep sense of melancholy and alienation, reflecting the larger collective sorrow of the Iraqi society. The haunting remnants of violence and destruction, which manifest as the real physical ruins and psychological scars left by the violence, are all around him. Fadi, like many Iraqis, struggles to maintain his identity in the midst of ongoing catastrophe, and the novel portrays this internal tension. Antoon explores these inner depths, highlighting the human soul's fragility and enduring capacity to survive in the face of intense pain.

Fadi begins to experience his own suffering as he rejects the destiny that his family's past has set for him. Given the country's high rate of pain and bloodshed, he is reluctant to be associated with death. He suffers from constant reminders of his own mortality, the horrors of battle, and the faces of the dead. He is against the idea of continuing the

burial traditions of his family. Rather, he wants to choose a new path, one that is representative of beauty and energy. Fadi, a young Iraqi man, embodies this tension. Post-2010, violence permeates his life, scarring his relationships and memories. Rejecting his family's burial traditions—a legacy tied to death's ubiquity—he dreams of sculpting at Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts, seeking to affirm life amid rubble. Yet, as he muses, "How could life continue normally when death is so prevalent?" (85), his aspirations falter. Nightmares blur reality and dream, a phenomenon Cathy Caruth (1996) ties to trauma's "belatedness"—an unprocessed shock resurfacing later (62). For Fadi, these visions anchor him to a past that denies peace, yet his art resists death's grip, echoing Vickroy's "rebellion of survival" (2002). More than defiance, his sculptures reimagine memory, forging a fragile bridge to a community unmade by war. The trauma follows him even if he wants to break free from this pattern. His thoughts and nightmares are still plagued by the faces of the dead. His nightmares are unending-violence and destruction that make him afraid to sleep. Fadi finds himself in a world where death has taken over his hours of wakefulness and his hours of sleep. These nightmares are a continuum of real life into his life, so clear that they become part of his life. He keeps these visions to himself, not sharing them even with his family for fear of being seen as weak. As Erikson (1995) says, " Trauma entails repeating traumatic events again through flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, and figments of imagination " (184). For Fadi, this trauma of living in war-torn Iraq is what keeps him anchored to the past and avoids peace. The nightmares, the visions of destruction, are his companions. possible (84)". The shards, in Fadi's mind, symbolize the breakdown of his family and his country. In a same vein, his creative goals of creating life amid devastation mirror Antoon's more general criticism of war's ability to destroy but not completely eradicate. Rebuilding a coherent sense of self in a world permanently changed by violence is made more difficult by the novel's motif of broken mirrors and fading reflections.

Fadi's artistic ambitions in Ave Maria are a poignant act of resistance to death's pervasiveness. His desire to produce life-affirming work in a damaged environment is a perfect example of what Vickroy calls the "rebellion of survival" in trauma stories. Similar to this, his family's traditions and rituals exhibit a form of cultural resilience while bearing the weight of intergenerational trauma. Antoon's portrayal of these elements emphasizes how, despite the devastation caused by war, the human spirit attempts to preserve continuity and purpose in the face of loss and displacement. The power of traumatic incidents, Fadi's become enable to maintain a regular connection, particularly with his cousin Reem, is a result of the frightening dreams that interrupt his sleep. She leaves for Europe following his failure to propose, while Fadi deals with the aftermath of his emotional retreat. He does meet other women after her departure, but he cannot work out lasting relationships. His heart, heavy as a tomb with death and despair, closes any avenue for anyone to approach him. Yousif calls it in a way as "full of death" (123), something that stands between him and others. Every time he considers making a proposal of marriage to one of these women he meets, he is suddenly overcome with the urge to retreat. His mind, scarred by the traumas of war and loss, draws back, and the emotional connection that would make love or marriage possible cannot be created. As Yousif confesses, "I knew that my heart was a hole one could pass through but never reside in" (114). This alienation is not only emotional; it is basically a detachment from any possibility of having a future. According to Herman (1997), traumatic events frequently have a negative effect on interpersonal relationships by eroding people's capacity for intimacy and trust (51). Psychologists also contend that traumatized people shun long-term attachments because they have a shorter perspective of the future and believe death will arrive soon. Fadi sees marriage as impossible as he doesn't want to ensnare anyone in a life that he believes is pointless and dominated by the pain of his past.

Things start to get shoddier for Fadi afterward the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, which further engraves sectarian violence and instability in it. The country then turns into a cauldron of chaos, with death an imminent presence everywhere. Fadi can feel his trauma increasingly weighing upon him, as he may get caught up in the cycle of grief and loss. His internal struggle becomes unbearable: "I feel like I'm suffocating, trapped in this spiral of violence" (85). Nightmares of bodies and ruin persist, drowning him in a reality were, as Samer notes, "death walks faster than time" (102). His sleep is troubled by nightmares that continue unabated, full of faces of the dead and haunting memories of his past. As a result, he feels increasingly alienated from his environment; to him, the world is collapsing. He reflects on this: "I cannot escape. Every night, the images come back-of people, of bodies, of violence. It's as if I am drowning, but there's no one to pull me out" (129). Feeling cut off from his life and those around him, Fadi is experiencing heightened psychological discomfort. He rejects any attempts to build connections, including with his ex-fiance, Reem, because of the trauma he bears, which keeps him from developing any permanent bonds. He acknowledges that he cannot provide her with any tranquility or security, stating, "I am aware that I cannot guarantee her a future. What I've witnessed and the things I carry inside of me are too heavy for my heart. Love is no longer possible (84). Fadi's dejection is a reflection of the psychological ramifications of trauma, which may leave people with a fractured sense of self and make it impossible to imagine a world free from the atrocities of their past. Struggling to escape the misery of the never-ending war in Iraq and the devastation that it has taken on him, Fadi has a pervasive sense of helplessness in this agonizing environment. His psychological loneliness, insomnia, and persistent nightmares are all instances of how trauma manifests itself in the daily lives of those who reside in a war-torn country where the past and present are closely entwined in an endless circle of suffering.

Fadi's ongoing trauma makes it increasingly difficult for him to distinguish between illusions and reality. His awareness of death becomes more pronounced than his awareness of the living, leading to a profound sense of loneliness, as though the deceased are closer to him than those around him. His emotional and psychological state reflects the growing helplessness many Iraqis experience in a violent, war-torn environment. For Fadi, sleep is no longer a refuge; he and others fear the night, haunted by the constant dread of death. This persistent trauma weakens his grip on reality, making survival in such a setting feel ever more uncertain.

War and violence are central themes in Ave Maria, where Antoon explores the profound effects of conflict on the human psyche and examines the often-uncommon responses individuals have to living through conflict. The trauma of war is evident in the characters' experiences, which are marked by lingering emotional scars. Fadi reflects on the war's aftermath: " The lights were out because most of the chandeliers had fallen on top of us and in the last hour the power had been cut off. The church was shrouded in darkness, and it was difficult to see anything by the faint glimmer from one or two candles that were still burning at the altar……." (127).

According to Elaine Scarry (1985), war is driven by the intent to inflict harm, with "the ultimate aim being to cause more harm than the opponent" (12). In *Ave Maria*, Fadi, an artist striving to capture life in his artwork, is instead overwhelmed by the pervasive presence of death. He reflects on how the destruction of his homeland shapes his daily existence, questioning how life can persist amid such devastation. As he observes, "Death is a daily friend here, not a guest. It raps on doors, raps on the hearts of living people, and scribbles its imprint on their bodies every day. As Antoon states, the streets are its canvas" (92). Antoon enters the underworld, where there is no way out of the never-ending, horrible nightmares and the lines between life and death are blurred. Fadi, a character in Ave Maria, too undergoes a similar blending of the actual and dream worlds, where it is tough to express the difference due to the trauma of

violence and conflict. Fadi's mental health suffers as a result of this hazy reality, as he grows more and more cut off from the outside world. "There are moments when I am unable to distinguish whether I am awake or still in the nightmare that has taken over my life," he muses (98). His sense of loneliness and detachment from reality is exacerbated by his uncertainty about life and death. Death turns into an all-pervading force that casts a shadow over every second, reducing his capacity for happiness or beauty. This is comparable to what Herman states: "Because of their inner darkness and sense of loneliness, traumatized persons find it difficult to appreciate life and participate in many things that other people do, which prevents them from taking advantage of any opportunities to enjoy life." (48).

Fadi perceives death as an ever-present, inescapable force, one that has permeated every aspect of his environment in the wake of war and escalating violence. He observes, “The voices of the dead are louder than those of the living; their echoes fill the streets” (110). Once an abstract and distant concept, death has transformed into a looming, terrifying presence that grows more menacing each day. This experience aligns with Judith Herman’s assertion that “traumatized individuals experience complete isolation, abandonment, and exclusion from the divine and human systems of protection and care that support life” (52). For Fadi, death becomes an all-encompassing presence, shaping every aspect of his relationships and reinforcing a profound sense of alienation. His detachment from the world he once knew is evident when he reflects, “The city has become a stranger to me, and I feel like an outsider in my own life” (120). Like many in his community, Fadi feels powerless, resigned to the violence and death that seem inevitable. Those around him are trapped in a vicious cycle of waiting and uncertainty. He laments, “We have all become prisoners of the same cycle. All we do is wait for death to come, and we wonder who will be next” (115). This resignation reflects the overwhelming sense of helplessness among the traumatized. Fadi’s father echoes this sentiment, stating, “There's nothing left to fight

for. If it's our time, we'll go. What can we do?" (123). Throughout the novel, the characters are portrayed as resigned to a life in which violence and death remain inescapable realities.

Fadi's family has learned to live with conflict as a constant in their life, almost like a regular guest. Their sole anchor is the daily routine, and they only have one goal in life: to survive. They, like many others impacted by the ongoing violence, are stuck in a limbo with little hope for the future or for recovery. Fadi's entire family is affected by the cruelty of war, therefore the anguish is not just him. Laurie Vickory clarifies that " a traumatic event can have an irreversible impact on a person's mental health, altering their memory, self-awareness, and interpersonal relationships" (11). Fadi and his loved ones can relate to this sentiment, as the violence in their environment gradually erodes their ties to the past and to one another.

Yassin's homecoming, in which he witnesses the destruction of Iraq, encapsulates the shock and sorrow of seeing a once-familiar place morph into one characterized by bloodshed and disaster. This instance supports Elaine Scarry's contention that conflict modifies not just the natural world but also the strong bonds that people have with it, altering how they perceive the world and who they are. These observations draw attention to Ave Maria's main topic, which is the deep upheaval that results from seeing a once-stable society destroyed and the lingering effects of war on people, families, and communities. The novel's analysis of trauma and displacement is essential to comprehending its emotional depth and significance if you're looking for further insights from *Ave Maria.*

Also, another characters with different point view which is Samer, Samer is an outspoken figure who bemoans the destruction that has swept over Iraq as a result of both domestic strife and international involvement. He views the U.S.-led invasion's aftermath as chaotic and disastrous, pointing out that it has uprooted countless families

and deepened sectarian divisions. The streets are now littered with dead bodies, which were previously a rare sight—" We've become experts at mourning. Every day brings new losses, new faces to grieve, and new reasons to despair. How can a city endure when its heart is ripped out, piece by piece? " (90). Samer's complaints are similar to Maha's when she describes Baghdad as a place "where death walks faster than time itself" (102) in her reflections on the city's decline into violence.

Similarly, Samer's passionate criticisms of foreign interference draw attention to the wider social dissatisfaction with unmet freedom promises. These individuals offer a multifaceted depiction of trauma, highlighting its diverse effects across gender and age boundaries. According to Samer, the invasion has strengthened extreme ideas and incited animosity among Iraqis. The cultural and theological divisions have only become worse as a result of the imposition of foreign ideas, making reconciliation appear unachievable. With bitterness, he says: "What remains of Iraq? Silence and dust. The sun feels too heavy to rise, and shadows flood the streets (114). This resistance extends beyond Fadi. Maha, grappling with faith after the church bombing, clings to tradition as both solace and burden. "Faith does not protect us; it only gives us something to lose," she reflects (79), her isolation mirroring the community's disintegration. Samer, meanwhile, rails against Iraq's ruin: "We've become experts at mourning" (90), blaming foreign intervention for deepening sectarian rifts. Youssef, nostalgic for a lost Baghdad, resigns to its decay: "The city of my youth is gone" (75). Together, they reveal trauma's varied faces—anger, despair, and quiet endurance—across gender and generation. Traumatic incidents severely damage human connections, eroding love, friendship, and trust within families and communities. They disrupt victims' sense of self, which is deeply rooted in their social relationships (Herman, 1997: 51). Maha feels stuck in a "bottomless pit," a condition of extreme hopelessness and uncertainty, during her reflective times. Her sorrow for Baghdad is a reflection of the destruction of a city without a "stabbed heart". Her memories of a

nation that has been irrevocably damaged by bloodshed and conflict are weighing her down.

In the closing moments of the novel, Maha surrenders to a life wherein faith and tradition are her solace and chains. Her relationships-family, husband, close friends-are torn asunder either by death, displacement, or exile. Her lonely self speaks to the fractured walls of her house, symbolic of her own isolation and futility at making sense out of a disintegrating world. Like the withering vine of the church garden that clings to the shattered remnants of the altar of the Eucharist, Maha hangs on for life, literally, to the still-lingering echoes of times of yore. Death is not only a physical event but also turns out to be a metaphor for disconnection and loss of community. Her isolation reverberates in Samer's words: "Faith cannot bloom where blood stains the soil; yet, without it, we cannot survive at all" (85). Her survival, then, becomes symbolic because of enduring such great loss. Like the sacred relics she tries to preserve, she finds strength in the remnants of what once gave her life purpose while the fragments feel weighed down by loss. The trauma she suffered sealed a mark in her identity, similar to what Vickroy observed: "trauma transforms the memory, relationships, and sense of self" (Vickroy, 2002:160).

Her hopes for a life outside of Baghdad appear far-fetched and unreachable. Samer's eerie assessment of Iraq captures the general sense of hopelessness: "Baghdad is a broken mirror, its shards scattered and stained with tears." "The cracks will always show, even if the pieces fit together again" (110). The novel's main topic of survival amid the irreversible fissures of a ruined nation is emphasized by this poignant image. The difficulties that the Iraqis in Ave Maria endure are a reflection of the larger problems of a country that is enmeshed in cycles of unrest and instability. Many people thought that change would bring opportunity and optimism, but as violence and social disintegration increased, their circumstances deteriorated. They were plunged into a gap where the future appeared unknown and dark, and dreams of reconstruction were

replaced by a spiral into anarchy, characterized by the loss of homes, neighborhoods, and identities.

Antoon portrays the collective agony of Iraqis via the experiences of his characters, particularly Youssef, who represents both tenacity and pessimism. Youssef wants to live a meaningful life and use beauty and art to convey the vitality of existence. However, the harsh reality imposed by the ongoing fighting makes such aims difficult. Uncontrollable forces have taken away his alternatives, forcing him, like many other people in Iraq, to accept a life marked by loss and ruin. Through Youssef's tale, Antoon depicts the price of ongoing nightmares and debilitating agony, demonstrating how the violence in Baghdad becomes an image for personal strife. The fragmented lives of the novel's protagonists are reflected in its broken shape, which emphasizes the societal and personal tragedies that the Iraqi people endure. By serving as both acts of resistance and archives of suffering, these stories help to preserve the memory of a divided nation and the tenacious spirit of its people. Iraqis in *Ave Maria (The Baghdad Eucharist)* struggle to escape the relentless grip of their circumstances while holding onto shards of hope in the face of hopelessness as they deal with both personal and societal tragedies.

4.1 CONCLUSION

Beyond its narrative, *The Baghdad Eucharist* offers a profound examination of the human condition amidst conflict. The story encompasses various emotional layers, vividly depicting life in contemporary Iraq while conveying the ongoing anguish of living through combat. The protagonist Fadi is both the voice and the mirror of his people's collective suffering, with his personal hardships mirroring the wider moral, psychological, and cultural scars of war. One of the novel's most remarkable achievements is its capacity to humanize the effects of conflict—not only the financial toll, but also the degradation of identity, relationships, and hope. Fadi's story, like the experiences of many others, is marked by loss—of family, love, hopes, and the comforts of home. The nonlinear form adds to this sense of fragmentation by reflecting the broken lives of Iraqis that actually existed is continuously changed by violence and instability. Ave Maria delves on themes of resistance and survival as well. Rather of concentrating solely on despair, the narrative highlights the little, defiant acts of tenacity and the search for purpose in the face of unremitting destruction. Despite being thwarted, Fadi's artistic aspirations embody the basic human yearning of bringing beauty and significance to a world ruled by death and destruction.

The novel also critiques the recurring nature of war by illustrating how generations are locked in a cycle of grief, alienation, and untapped potential. Fadi's depiction emphasizes the lasting consequences of violence by demonstrating how trauma is inherited and recurring, impacting not only individuals but entire communities.

Due to its powerful imagery and striking symbolism, *Ave Maria* resonates as a story that is both personal and universal. It unflinchingly explores the scars of war while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. Its status as a modern classic in contemporary literature is solidified by its poignant commentary on the fragility of optimism in the face of overwhelming adversity.

4.2. KEY FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The result provides a thorough examination of the physical and psychological aspect of the war with a focus on how it reflects through individual and society making a lifelong impact. Antoon employs Christian symbols like the Eucharist to evoke resiliency, grief and survival, providing a spiritual and cultural vocabulary for traversing trauma. The study also addresses the intergenerational impact of trauma, highlighting how generations are affected by the memories of war. Also, the novel's tension between narration and stillness highlights the contended role that suppression and communication play in trauma recovery.

Antoon moreover enhances the story's moody vibe by portraying Baghdad as a scarred, emblematic city, in which the actual topography stands witness to and victim of the violence that cascades through it. Antoon's work adds to the expanding canon of Iraqi literature and post-2003 war fiction by offering new insight into the psychological and cultural impact of Iraq's long-running war.

The study demonstrates the significance of trauma theory as a way to understand Antoon's treatment of memory, identity, and resilience. It signifies the power of faith and culture in literature and the significance of mythology in sustaining hope through the ravages of destruction. *Ave Maria* is a genre-defining text in trauma studies, the post-colonial field, and Middle Eastern literature that allows literature as a whole to view and contemplate universal themes of suffering, survival, and resilience in post-conflict places.

This study further contributes to the interconnected discourse of the global south of how literature, particularly that written in post/conflicted culture areas, conveys this residual impact of violence, not just on people per se, but on society as a more collective identity. Related authors and works from the canon of contemporary Iraqi war literature include Sinan Antoon's previous novels, like *The Broken Mirrors*, and Hassan Blasim's *The Madman of Freedom Square*, that engage similar themes of displacement, trauma, and the absurdity of war. Other major works including Mahmoud Saeed's *The World through the Eyes of the Prophet* and *Iman Humaydan Younes's The Weight of Paradise*, focus on the psychological toll of war and the shattering effects on individual and cultural identity. Not only do these works supply a window into the context of the larger post-invasion Iraqi narrative, however, but they also play a role in forming a collective understanding of the trajectories of trauma and war experience.

REFERENCES

- Antoon, S., & Tabet, M. (2017). The Baghdad Eucharist: A Novel. The American University in Cairo Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2ks6zs0
- Berger, J. (1997). Trauma and literary theory. Contemporary Literature, 38(3), 569–582. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208924
- Caruth, C. (1996). Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 4(83): 235 – 241.
- Erikson, K. (1995). Notes on trauma and community. In Cathy Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 3(62): 183- 199.
- Freud, S. (1961). Beyond the pleasure principle (J. Strachey, Trans., pp. 23–26). W.W. Norton & Company. Print.
- Herman, J. L. (1997). Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror. Basic Books.
- Kaplan, E. A. (2005). Trauma culture. The politics of terror and loss in media and literature. New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1(72): 211- 235.
- Scarry, E. (1985). The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world. Oxford University Press.
- Bond, L., & Craps, S. (2019). Trauma (The New Critical Idiom). Routledge.
- Vickroy, L. (2002). Trauma and survival in contemporary fiction. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 6(52): 158 – 166.