



الأحلام والرغبة الى الهجرة: استعارة للهوية المشتتة في نظرية جاك لكان في رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان لسان أنطون

حسنا صدرالدين حسن<sup>(١)</sup> (\*)، سيد محمد مرندي<sup>(٢)</sup> محمد باقر شعبان بور<sup>(٣)</sup>  
(١) جامعة طهران كلية اللغات الأجنبية والآداب  
(٢) جامعة طهران كلية اللغات الأجنبية والآداب  
(٣) جامعة طهران كلية اللغات الأجنبية والآداب  
[hasna.s.h@ut.ac.ir](mailto:hasna.s.h@ut.ac.ir) :الكاتب المسؤول: (\*)

#### الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان لسان أنطون من خلال مفهوم جاك لكان حول "الهوية المنقسمة"، كما ورد في نظريته عن تكوين الهوية. يرى لكان أن الهوية المنقسمة تتكشف في الأحلام، حيث يحدث تفتت الهوية أثناء عملية تكوينه. تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن الأحلام المتكررة التي يمز بها البطل، جواد، خصوصاً تلك التي تتعلق بوالده، وطموحاته الفنية، وكوابيسه المزعجة، تعكس الذات المنقسمة الممهورة بالنقص والرغبات غير المحققة. ويُعدّ هذا النص اللاكاني عاملاً محفزاً لرغبته في الهجرة، كما يتجلى هذا التعبير المحوري عن صراعه الداخلي. فهذه الأحلام ليست عشوائية، بل مشبعة بأدلة رمزية تعمل كاستعارات للذات الغير مستقرة. وفي النهاية، تبرهن هذه الدراسة على أن أحلام جواد تبين هشاشة هويته، وكيف أن سرد أنطون للرواية تكشف العواقب النفسية لهذا التفتت، ولا سيما ميله إلى التردد في اتخاذ القرارات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأحلام، الهوية المشتتة، جاك لكان، الهجرة، وحدها شجرة الرمان.

تأريخ النشر: ٢٠٢٥-١٢-١

تأريخ القبول: ٢٠٢٥-١٠-٦

تأريخ الاستلام: ٢٠٢٥-٨-٢٧

### Dreams and Desire for Migration: A Lacanian Reading of Fragmented Body in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

Hasnaa Sadruldeen Hasan<sup>(1)</sup> (\*), Seyed Mohammad Marandi<sup>(2)</sup> Mohammad Bagher Shabanpour<sup>(3)</sup>

(1) Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tehran

(2) Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tehran

(3) Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tehran

(\*) Corresponding author: [hasna.s.h@ut.ac.ir](mailto:hasna.s.h@ut.ac.ir)

#### Abstract

This paper examines Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* through the lens of Jacques Lacan's concept of the divided subject, as articulated in his theory of identity formation. Lacan claims that a divided identity is revealed in dreams, occurring when the individual's identity is fragmented within the process of identity formation. The study argues that the recurring dreams experienced by the protagonist, Jawad, particularly those involving his father, his artistic aspirations, and his disturbing nightmares, reflect the split subject marked by lack and unfulfilled desires. Crucially, this Lacanian lack becomes a motivating force for his desire to migrate and emerges as a central expression of his internal conflict. These dreams are not random but saturated with symbolic signifiers that function as metaphors for an unstable self. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Jawad's dreams reveal the instability of his identity and how Antoon's narrative captures the psychological consequences of this fragmentation, especially his tendency toward indecision

**Keywords:** Dreams, Fragmented Body, Jacques Lacan, Migration, Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*

Received: 27-8-2025

Accepted: 6-10-2025

Published: 1-12-2025





## Introduction

The tendency toward migration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein's thirty-five-year rule, can be observed among segments of the Iraqi population due to war and harsh socio-political conditions. The theme of migration, along with the desire for it, is central to *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon, a contemporary diasporic Iraqi writer who emigrated with his family to the United States after the 1991 Gulf War.

The critical question that arises, however, is not limited to defining or categorizing migration; rather, it concerns the relationship between the desire to migrate and human identity, and whether identity plays a role in shaping this decision. To examine this connection, researchers must interrogate the very nature of identity itself. As Radwa Mahmoud notes, the exploration of identity is crucial to understanding Iraqi literature written in exile, including Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2016, p. 49). Drawing on S. Mustafa's views on Iraqi writers in exile, Mahmoud underscores the significance of this relationship.

The concept of identity in Antoon's novel has been studied from different critical perspectives. José M. Yebra and Alfonso Revilla, for instance, investigate the sense of estrangement experienced by Iraqis within their own homeland (2022, p. 100). They highlight Jawad's articulation of this alienation when he remarks, "I felt for the hundredth time what a stranger I'd become in my hometown" (Antoon, 2013, p. 166). Yebra and Revilla argue that this alienation emerges as a direct outcome of necropolitics, through which the United States and other Western powers, under the guise of liberation, sought not to safeguard Iraqi life but to regulate death. In fact, as James D. Fearon notes regarding both "social" and "personal" identity (p. 2), discussions of identity in the context of necropolitics focus primarily on social identity, while not entirely neglecting the personal dimension.

Other scholars emphasize the cultural dimension of identity, which tends to focus more on the social, or, in other words, the realm of appearances, and how these social appearances, such as norms and rules, influence personal identity. Nibras Al-Omar, for example, challenges traditional definitions of cultural identity that focus on belonging to a particular group or culture. Using Stuart Hall's theory, she stresses the dynamic and fluid nature of identity, as opposed to its static or fixed conceptualizations (2018, p. 215). Similarly, Azhar Hameed Mankhia et al. analyze the notion of a traumatized identity that is rooted in societal corruption and intertwined with personal identity, through the lens of Erikson's theory. They contend that individuals who suffer trauma carry the shock of the past into the present, a theme reflected in Antoon's novel (2018, p. 90). Yet, even in the face of such trauma, these scholars note the persistence of hope, while also emphasizing that "they are not able to go beyond and start a new life under such terrible circumstances" (2018, p. 96). In all the articles mentioned above, identity is not treated as a primary existence. None of them examines the nature of being itself as Jacques Lacan does, referring to it as fragmented identity.

While these studies provide valuable insights into identity in *The Corpse Washer*, to our knowledge, none have explicitly addressed the concept of fragmented identity or established a correlation between fragmented identity and the desire to migrate. This article aims to contribute to this field by bridging this gap. To accomplish this, the paper first outlines Jacques Lacan's theory of identity formation, which develops across the three interrelated realms of the mirror stage, the symbolic order, and the real, resulting in a divided and unstable identity. The study will then examine how this fragmented identity, particularly its intrinsic sense of lack, produces the desire to migrate. Finally, the article will analyze the protagonist's dreams and nightmares in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, interpreting them as signs of a divided self that both reflects and fuels his longing for migration.

## Lacan's fragmented body

One of the fields frequently employed in the academic discipline of literary criticism is psychoanalysis. As Md. Mahroof Hossain states in "Psychoanalytic Theory Used in English Literature: A Descriptive Study", there is a strong connection between literature and psychoanalysis (2017, p. 40). He adds that, through psychoanalysis, a researcher can uncover the hidden meanings embedded within a literary text. Hossain identifies three main theories related to psychoanalysis: Freudian theory, Lacanian theory, and object-relations theory (2017, p. 42). Similarly, Ayesha Dar explains that psychology is not only the scientific study of human



behavior and the mind but also involves understanding mental processes, behavior, and brain functions (2022, pp. 284–292 ).

Two important points derived from Lacan's theory of identity formation, which are useful in this study, are: first, the existence of gaps and lacks within this formation. One such gap is the division between the subject's conscious self and the unconscious. Lacan, through his famous statement, "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" (Lacan, 1966, p. 126), illustrates this division. The second point is the ongoing and processual nature of identity formation. Lacan argues that identity is not fixed but is continuously produced through a dynamic process structured by the three interrelated and inseparable registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

Before explaining the first stage of identity formation, the mirror stage, Lacan points out that, prior to it, around six months of age, the infant experiences itself as uncoordinated, incomplete, and fragmented. But in the mirror stage, through seeing his reflection in the mirror, the infant, for the first time, perceives himself as a unified and coherent whole. Lacan claims this is a process of "spatial identification," in which "phantasies extend from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (Lacan, 1966, p. 3). This sense of unity is merely an illusion, derived from the reflected image, which is not the true self but an imaginary projection. This moment is marked by a misrecognition that generates a form of alienation between the authentic, fragmented self and the imaginary, unified self. As Lacan notes, "this alienating identity will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development" (Ibid). In other words, the alienated identity formed in the early stages of an infant's life persists throughout the individual's existence. In this study, this stage is explored across all phases of Jawad's life, from his childhood to adulthood and even middle age.

In the second stage, known as the symbolic order, Lacan argues that identity is shaped by language, a system of signifiers, as well as by social roles and cultural norms. When the subject enters this stage, the sense of fragmentation intensifies due to the multiplicity of words and signifiers. Language, as a system of meaning, provides the subject with numerous descriptions and representations, yet it can never fully articulate the subject's true essence. Xiongzhen Teng explains, "language determines the position of the subject and the role of the able reference". He adds, "It is the existence of language that allows the subject to not be out of place in the family, and culture" (2024, p. 79). However, the subject is not the master of language in the symbolic order; instead, "the subject is subordinated" (Lacan, 1966, p.178), even controlled, by the signifier. This means that our thoughts, identities, and desires are formed and limited by the network of signifiers that exist in the symbolic order. In this case, Lacan highlights that the subject is always caught within an endless chain of signifiers, none of which is sufficient to completely interpret or define the self. This dynamic creates a persistent gap between what we are and what others say we are, producing a secondary layer of alienation that builds upon the initial split formed during the mirror stage.

For the stage of the Real, Lacan emphasizes its interdependence with the other two stages, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Javad Momeni, drawing on Žižek and Daly, explains that the triadic structure of all being is constructed by these three realms, which means that the Real is always encountered through its relation to the Imaginary and the Symbolic (2017, p. 83). On the symbolic level, Evans, based on Lacan, clarifies that the Real is "the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail" (1996, p. 11). In other words, language cannot adequately explain the Real, since words inevitably collapse when confronted with it. Death, for instance, can never be fully articulated, even through commemorative rituals. This is why anxiety persists at the core of subjectivity, and Lacan therefore posits a close relationship between the Real and anxiety (1996, p. 11). From this perspective, there is a crucial difference between the Real and "the true," because, as noted earlier, words always fail to articulate the Real (1996, p. 162). This leads Lacan to associate the Real with the concept of impossibility, defining it as "the impossible" (1996, p. 163). The Real in the Imaginary is, as Momeni notes, based on Lewis, "the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire" (2017, p. 85). In fact, the Real in this stage is grounded in lack. In the mirror stage, the infant sees himself as whole in the mirror, but in reality, he remains incomplete and fragmented. The infant desires to identify with this wholeness, but he can never fully recapture it. The gap, therefore, remains, along with the endless desire to close it. Here, too, impossibility is at work. Thus, Lacan concludes: "the Real is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the Symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way" (Evans, 1996, p. 163). It means that there are experiences an individual cannot articulate



because they exist beyond language, such as the sorrow caused by death. No words can fully express the truth or the depth of this sadness.

As mentioned, there is an eternal desire to fill the gap between the truth of the fragmented body and its illusory wholeness. In fact, Lacan asserts that “everything comes back to be or not to be” (Lacan, 1988, p. 192). In this context, he argues that existence inherently encompasses both presence and absence, which are inseparable; at the core of presence lies absence. This claim is rooted in the original misrecognition of wholeness experienced during the mirror stage. Lacan identifies this absence as the “lack of being,” or, in other words, a lack of existence. This persistent lack drives the subject toward an unending desire to fill it. Because the subject continually perceives unity or completeness in the other, they are driven to desire and to identify with the other. It is important to note that Lacan conceptualizes the Other in two forms: the *small other* (with a small letter “o”), which refers to specific individuals such as the mother, father, or others encountered during the mirror stage; and the *big Other* (with a capital “O”), which represents cultural norms, language, and social structures within the symbolic order (Evans, 1996, p. 135). This study demonstrates that, during the mirror stage, the protagonist attempts to fill his lack by identifying with other individuals like his father, while in the symbolic order, his desire shifts toward immigration, because he perceives wholeness in the Other, in this case, the other country.

### Jawad's Fragmented Identity in the Mirror Stage

In his work *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan Antoon illustrates how the protagonist, Jawad, experiences numerous events during Iraq's various wars, including the Iran-Iraq War and the American invasion. These challenging events include the murder of his brother during the war, his intention to marry Reem and her subsequent disappearance, and his transition from corpse washer to artist; in other words, his confrontation with his father and his disagreement with traditional rituals. Through these experiences, Antoon demonstrates how Jawad, as Lacan would argue, possesses a fragmented identity. This study aims to explore this fragmented identity through Lacan's two orders, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, in the first two sections, as well as its effects on Jawad's dreams in the third section. Finally, it examines how this fragmentation fuels Jawad's desire to migrate.

Within the Imaginary order, Jawad initially aspires to emulate his father and continue his profession, as his mother presents his father's work as an ideal vocation. Jawad observes five clouds in the sky and wonders which one might carry the soul of the deceased after hearing his mother's explanation about his father's profession. His mother tells him, “It's a very honorable profession, and those who do it are rewarded by God.” (Antoon, 2013, p. 14). She further explains, after the purified body is buried, that “the soul rises to the sky” (Antoon, 2013, p. 14). This scene in the novel, with its symbolic references to the sky and clouds, or the upward gaze toward a higher realm as a place of perfection, illustrates one of the many moments when Jawad reverts to the imaginary order, the first realm in Lacan's theory of identity formation in which the identification with an image of wholeness happens. The stage that Lacan not only understands it, in Lacanian words, “as an identification” but also “the transformation that takes place in the subject” (Evans, 1996, p. 1). In this stage, the subject perceives the other as complete and unified and begins to identify with that image. This is why Jawad becomes determined to follow in his father's path: a desire he has carried since childhood to strengthen his sense of connection with him. For Jawad, his father's work, the ritual washing of the dead, represents not only a profession but also an idealized and almost sacred vocation.

In the beginning, Jawad cannot do anything without the support of his family, especially his brother, Ammourey, who encourages him to pursue what he wants and loves. Jawad states, “Ammourey, who used to stand by me at home, defending my point of view” (Antoon, 2013, p. 17). According to Lacan, before entering the imaginary stage, before six months of age, the infant perceives itself as a fragmented body. In other words, infants are “unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial” (Lacan, 1996, p. 1). In other words, before this stage, the infant not only depends on external assistance for basic needs but also, on an internal level, experiences a profound sense of incompleteness or lack of being. From six to eighteen months, however, the child begins to recognize the other, such as the parents, as a complete and unified being, and consequently starts to identify with that imagined wholeness “in order to hold it in his gaze” (Evans, 1996, p. 1). Similarly, Jawad realizes through his mother's words that his father has a professional job, and he desires to identify with him.



One of Jawad's most apparent feelings in the novel is a sense of alienation and estrangement. When Jawad tries to speak with his father about his private life, he states, "My father and I were strangers" (Antoon, 2013, p. 66). In fact, according to Lacan, the child experiences a profound sense of alienation from itself due to the inevitable gap between its fragmented real body and the imagined wholeness of the Other. Through this total image of the other, what Lacan describes as a mirage, the subject anticipates "the maturation of his power". However, this image exists only as a Gestalt, an external form that is "more constituent" of the infant's identity than "constituted" by it. This image carries two essential features: on the one hand, it provides a sense of fixity and stability; on the other, it generates a persistent sense of alienation. It maintains a consistent vertical dimension while being inverted along the horizontal axis, a dynamic that signifies the complex process of identification. These dual aspects symbolize the mental permanence of the subject, leaving a lasting imprint on the psyche while simultaneously signaling its "alienating destination" (Lacan, 1996, p. 2), a consequence of the permanent gap between the fragmented real body and the imagined image of wholeness. Thus, this sense of alienation is rooted in the primordial fragmentation that is inherent to the subject's earliest developmental stage.

Certain elements collectively symbolize an idealized and complete image of the profession, the state of wholeness that Lacan calls the "Ideal-I" (Lacan, 1996, p. 2), with which the infant seeks to identify (Lacan, 1996, p. 3). There is ample evidence that the ritual washing of the dead was, for Jawad, an ideal profession and that he regarded his father as the perfect model for identification. One such piece of evidence is the recurring imagery of a clear atmosphere. The narrator employs this imagery to symbolize the purity and transcendence associated with the work. For instance, when Jawad visits his father's workplace for the first time to assist him, he recalls, "The sky was clear and cloudless that day" (Antoon, 2013, p. 20), symbolizing clarity and a sense of elevation tied to the profession. Another significant moment reinforcing the sacred and honorable nature of the work occurs when Jawad questions the absence of any signage for the washing place. His father explains, "There was no need for a sign, because it was not a shop or a store," adding that "everyone knew where the mghaysil was" (Antoon, 2013, p. 20). Despite his persistent desire to emulate his father as an image of completeness, his first opportunity to assist him fills him with fear, as he admits: "I felt a sense of awe as I stood in front of the door" (Antoon, 2013, p. 20). This reaction reflects the same sense of alienation experienced during the mirror stage; an alienation rooted in the subject's early perception of the fragmented body.

One can observe the process of misrecognition or misunderstanding in the novel when Jawad abandons his father's profession. He acknowledges, "My father was disappointed in me because I had decided not to follow in his footsteps," (Antoon, 2013, p. 77). As Evans, drawing on Lacan, explains, this moment relates to the initial stage of Lacanian identity formation. Through this act of misrecognition, the subject attains an imaginary understanding of the self, which is constitutive of the ego (Antoon, 2013, p. 96). Jawad's sense of completeness is ultimately illusory. In fact, the infant perceives this image as a whole, but in reality, this image or the other also contains a lack, a void that drives the infant to seek identification with yet another image. Jawad is no exception to this dynamic. After identifying with his father's profession, he gradually realizes that it does not provide the sense of completeness he once imagined. In contrast, he discovers a sense of freedom and creativity in art, which leads him to decide to become an artist. For Jawad, pursuing art represents the ideal profession for several reasons. First, it offers the possibility of fame, a prospect reinforced by his brother Ammourey's remark that Jawad's statues would one day "populate the squares of Baghdad" (Antoon, 2013, p. 17). Second, it promises the opportunity to earn more money, thereby improving his and his family's living conditions; as one of his friends informs him, even working as a house painter pays well, enabling him to purchase art supplies and "even contribute a bit to expenses at home" (Antoon, 2013, p. 77). Third, Jawad harbors a profound love for art, openly confessing that he is captivated by Picasso and other renowned artists from around the world (Antoon, 2013, p. 74). In other words, Jawad seeks to identify with these renowned artists, seeing them as representations of a complete and unified self.

What drives Jawad to follow his father's profession is a feeling of lack in his own existence. He feels incomplete, while his father represents a sense of wholeness for him. From a Lacanian perspective, there is a perpetual presence of lack within both the subject and the Other. As Dylan Evans explains, the relationship between the subject and the Other is fundamentally marked by this lack. He further explains, drawing on



Lacan's theory, that "the subject is constituted by this lack of being, which gives rise to desire, a want-to-be; desire is, therefore, essentially a desire for being" (Evans, 1996, p.17). The desire to fill this lack never ceases; rather, it sustains an ongoing process of identification, in which the subject continuously seeks new images to resolve a void that can never truly be filled. Even by the end of the novel, Jawad comes to realize once again that the profession of an artist is not an ideal path, particularly within the socio-political realities of Iraq. He realizes that this profession, too, is marked by a fundamental lack, which ultimately draws him, once again, toward his father's vocation as the washer of the dead. It is important to note that when the number of corpses doubles and Jawad realizes that "even the dead are not safe anymore" (Antoon, 2013, p. 112), he once again returns to his father's work. This shift from one occupation to another, or in other words, this changing of decisions, reflects a fragmented identity.

### **Jawad's Fragmented Identity in Symbolic Order**

In the second stage, or the symbolic order, signifiers play a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity. According to Lacan's theory, identity is shaped by language, which functions as a system of signifiers. The multiplicity of these signifiers generates a sense of fragmentation, as they offer diverse descriptions and representations of the subject. Importantly, Lacan argues that these endless signifiers can never fully capture the true essence of the subject; consequently, the subject continually seeks to reposition itself through different signifiers. This study examines on one hand, how the meanings of signifiers shift according to contextual factors, and on the other hand, how the subject repositions itself from one signifier to another. Both processes highlight the fragmented nature of identity.

For Jawad, the act of washing corpses initially represented an inherited profession, passed down through generations. As his father tells, "My father, my grandfather, and his grandfather all did it" (Antoon, 2013, p. 78). This signifier, corpse washer, is socially recognized as the continuation of an ancestral tradition. However, as the novel unfolds, the meaning of this signifier undergoes a significant transformation. Before the American invasion and prior to the Iran-Iraq War, Jawad begins to question the value of this inherited role. He clashes with his father, believing that painting is a more respectable profession, while his father dismisses it with disdain: "Our profession isn't decent?" he asks. "Not good enough for you, is it?" he adds with sadness, "Now you're too good for us. Well, thanks ever so much" (Antoon, 2013, p. 77-78). At this stage, Jawad experiences a profound sense of confinement under his father's authority, recognizing that the signifier corpse washer has shifted from an honorable legacy to a symbol of subjugation and control (Antoon, 2013, p. 79). With the worsening of their economic situation, the meaning of the signifier shifts yet again. As Jawad claims, "The wages I would make from painting were twice what my father would have paid me" (Antoon, 2013, p. 79). Here, the role of corpse washer is redefined, no longer a stable or respected profession but rather a powerless and economically inadequate position, incapable of improving one's life circumstances. Thus, throughout the novel, the signifier corpse washer continually shifts in meaning, from an inherited and socially valuable tradition to a marker of paternal control, and finally to a marker of economic vulnerability.

In a similar way, the meaning of the signifier artist also shifts throughout the novel. At the beginning, Jawad aspires to be an artist and resists his father's profession, which symbolically represents tradition. For him, an artist initially signifies freedom, creativity, and the possibility of following in the footsteps of great artists or even becoming one himself. However, by the end of the novel, when his artistic ambitions fail to provide stability or recognition, Jawad returns reluctantly to his father's profession. In this later stage, the meaning of the artist transforms from a symbol of creativity and liberation to one of failure and disillusionment. Jawad himself acknowledges this shift: "I began to feel bored and bitter in the late 1990s, especially as we were painting the houses of the nouveaux riches who had acquired obscene amounts of wealth by exploiting the embargo" (Antoon, 2013, p. 79). His confession reflects both his dissatisfaction and the erosion of creativity. In fact, desire cannot ever be satisfied (Evans, 1996, p. 106). Jawad further admits, "I found myself, for years on end, reduced to using no more than two or three colors. Pale colors on cold and monotonous surfaces. Surfaces without details or surprises" (Antoon, 2013, p. 80). The reduction in artistic expression mirrors the shrinking of his aspirations. Jawad even metaphorically associates his own artistic death with the image of a fly: "At times a stupid fly would buzz into the sticky surface of paint and struggle there for a few seconds before dying" (Antoon, 2013, p. 80). Here, the fly's fate symbolizes his own futile struggle and failed choice of becoming an artist. He reinforces this recognition when he laments: "Why was I so naïve as to nurture



the illusion that I could make a living as an artist” (Antoon, 2013, p. 79). Thus, the signifier artist undergoes a dramatic transformation: from a hopeful space of creativity and freedom to a marker of futility, disillusionment, and existential failure.

Within the novel, Jawad is repeatedly seen shifting between professions, as the value of each occupation changes over time. In other words, he slides from one signifier to another, yet none of these signifiers provides lasting satisfaction or fulfillment. This continual movement reflects Jawad’s fragmented subjectivity, in which identity remains unstable and incomplete. According to Lacanian theory, such fragmentation is rooted in lack, the fundamental sense of incompleteness that structures human subjectivity. This lack, in turn, generates desire, a perpetual and unending longing for wholeness. Based on the above explanation, the oscillation between the signifiers of *corpse washer* and *artist* illustrates two points: first, the instability of identity, which, as Lacan argues, is inherent to the nature of identity or shaped by society; and second, the existence of a deeper psychological drive toward an unattainable sense of completeness.

In fact, it is important to note that the oscillation between signifiers within the symbolic order affects the human psyche, encompassing both the conscious and the unconscious. In other words, the traces of this movement between signifiers lead to the emergence of a fragmented identity, which can be manifested in the unconscious. Accordingly, the next section will examine the appearance of these signifiers in dreams, one of the primary domains of the unconscious, which in turn signifies the fragmentation of identity.

### **The Emergence of Fragmented Identity in Dreams**

This section discusses the presence of signifiers in the unconscious, which manifest in individuals through dreams, symptoms, jokes, parapraxes, and other expressions. In this novel, Jawad attempts to articulate his need to distance himself from death and corpses. At this moment of expressing his need, on one hand, the need is transformed into a demand; on the other hand, Jawad is unable to fully articulate or explain this demand. Consequently, it becomes repressed within his unconscious. Lacan terms this process, in which an unfulfilled demand resides in consciousness yet is repressed, as repression. In fact, the concept of repression is one of the most crucial elements in Lacan’s theory. As Dylan Evans states, it refers to “the process by which certain thoughts or memories are expelled from consciousness and confined to the unconscious” (Evans, 1996, p. 192). Lacan argues that it is always “a signifier that is repressed, never the signified” (Evans, 1996, p. 192). It must also be noted that Lacan distinguishes between two kinds of repression: primal and secondary. Primal repression occurs when the subject articulates his needs, for in this act, the needs are transformed into demands. However, language can never fully articulate “the truth about truth” (Evans, 1996, p. 192), and thus desire remains hidden beyond demand. Consequently, the emergence of demand is simultaneous with the repression of desire, which constitutes primal repression. In *The Corpse Washer*, when Jawad states, “I told her about my clashes with him, that he was disappointed in me because I had decided not to follow in his footsteps and insisted on studying art, which he thought was a waste of time” (Antoon, 2013, p. 48); in fact, he confesses his disagreement with his father’s profession. In doing so, he is articulating his need to distance himself from death and corpses. At this moment, his need is transformed into a demand. However, he cannot fully articulate or explain this demand, and as a result, it is repressed in his unconscious. This represents a case of primal repression, in which his deeper desire, freedom from his father’s profession, or more broadly, for personal freedom, remains hidden beyond conscious awareness. In fact, Jawad also desires freedom from the pervasive war and violence, since the dead bodies he handles signify these forces, yet this desire too is repressed in his unconscious.

Secondary repression involves “the return of the repressed” (Evans, 1966, p. 139). This occurs when a signifier is elided from the chain of signifiers and repressed, yet simultaneously reappears in another form of the unconscious, such as dreams. Consequently, in secondary repression, as Evans, drawing on Lacan, states, “repression and the return of the repressed are ‘the same thing’” (1966, p. 192). In this context, he further explains that Lacan views “the unconscious as the effects of the SIGNIFIER on the subject” (Evans, 1966, p. 244). Thus, the unconscious is the domain in which the signifier is both repressed and returns in the various formations of the unconscious, including dreams, symptoms, jokes, parapraxes, and other expressions. One of the desires repressed in Jawad’s unconscious is his love for Reem. This desire is repressed because Jawad cannot marry her after she emigrates to seek medical treatment. However, this repressed desire returns in his



dreams as a case of secondary repression. Jawad repeatedly dreams of Reem, noting that the dream “had been recurring for weeks, with minor changes” (Antoon, 2013, p. 11).

To better understand the role of signifiers in dreams, it is important to note that, according to Lacan, one of the primary mechanisms that operates within them is metaphor. As a poststructuralist, Lacan “links metaphor to condensation,” following Freud’s terminology (Evans, 1996, p. 116). The important issue that must be noted is that –the dream involves “a single chain of signifiers” and there is a “diachronic relation between one signifier and another” (Evans, 1996, p.116) For example, in the signifying chain that begins with the image of a locked door, the interpretation may proceed toward the notion of paternal control: the locked door points to the key, the key suggests the hand, and the hand ultimately signifies the authority or control of the father. Similarly, in *The Corpse Washer*, in one of Jawad’s dreams, he sees his father sitting on a chair in the corner of the *meghesel* (washing place). Jawad recounts that he hears his father’s voice asking: “What are you waiting for?” (Antoon, 2013, p.76). He continues: “I turn to look for the voice and see Father sitting on a chair in the corner, his worry beads in his hand. Again, the question: ‘What are you waiting for?’ But now it comes from a different direction. I turn and see Father in another corner” (Antoon, 2013, p.76). This constant presence of his father everywhere signifies not only paternal authority but also the pervasive power of rituals and cultural identity.

Another metaphor that this dream signifies is that of presence and absence. At first, Jawad sees his father in various corners, but then he states: “I look everywhere, but Father has disappeared from every corner” (Antoon, 2013, p. 76). In this instance, the figure of the father merges with the concepts of presence and absence, of being and non-being, thereby producing a new meaning that reflects Jawad’s instability and fragmented identity. In fact, as Evans notes, drawing on Lacan’s concept of metaphor, a single chain of signifiers constitutes a domain in which “one thing is described by comparing it to another, but without directly asserting a comparison” (1996, p. 114). Evans illustrates this with the classic Shakespearean phrase, “Juliet is the sun,” (1996, p. 114), where Juliet is compared to the sun without the use of the word like. Evans adds For Lacan, however, “metaphor is thus the passage of the signifier into the signified, the creation of a new signified” (1996, p. 115). For further explanation, it can be said that each signifier carries specific meanings, but in metaphor, one signifier substitutes for another, thereby generating a new meaning or a new signified that did not exist before. For example, in the sentence, my father is a rock, the two signifiers, father and rock, combine to produce a new signified, such as strength or stability. The important question, then, is how the signifiers of presence and absence in Jawad’s dream point to the notion of a fragmented identity.

Another dream in which the signifiers of presence and absence appear is the nightmare that follows Jawad’s first experience of assisting his father in washing a corpse. Jawad recalls that “the dead man’s face kept gazing at him that night, but he had no eyes”; sometimes “the man’s face would disappear,” and at other times it would be “replaced with the faces of other dead people” (Antoon, 2013, p. 27). From a Lacanian perspective, this recurring, mutable face-imagery, its appearance, disappearance, and substitution, stages how a fragmented identity is apprehended in dreams: the oscillation between presence and absence reveals the subject’s divided sense of self. Lacan explains step by step how fragmented identity is grasped through dreams. He first argues that “a synthetic ego is henceforth constantly threatened by the memory of this sense of fragmentation” (Evans, 1996, p. 67). As mentioned earlier in relation to the mirror stage, the infant perceives the reflection of its fragmented body as a unified whole and identifies with it; however, the sense of fragmentation always threatens this unity and produces anxiety. According to Lacan, this anxiety manifests in dreams as “‘images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, [and] bursting open of the body,’ which haunt the human imagination” (Evans, 1996, p. 67) . In some instances, the body, in his dreams, is not only divided but also disappears entirely. For example, in that dream that Jawad sees his father standing in the corner of the *mghaysil*, but at other moments his father “has disappeared from every corner” (Antoon, 2013, p., 76). Thus, these dreams, involving dismemberment, reflect the anxiety experienced by Jawad, which in turn signifies his fragmented identity. In addition to the anxiety manifested as dismemberment in dreams, Lacan argues that the moment of “the disintegration of the rigid unity of the ego” (Evans, 1996, p. 67) is a crucial point for the emergence of such images in the unconscious. As explained in the previous section, when the subject enters the symbolic order, this “rigid unity of the ego” is disrupted, resulting in a divided or fragmented identity.



Finally, it is important to note the repetition of Jawad's dreams. Throughout the novel, certain dreams recur multiple times. For instance, Jawad's dream about Reem, in which he feels anxious about saving her, recurs frequently: "The same nightmare had been recurring for weeks, with minor changes" (Antoon, 2013, p. 11). In fact, repetition is a crucial concept for Lacan, who defines it as "the insistence of the signifier." He further explains that "certain signifiers insist on returning in the life of the subject, despite the resistances which block them" (Evans, 1996, p. 191). Jawad's repetitive dreams involve both the recurrence of entire dreams and the reappearance of specific elements within them. Indeed, "repetition is the general characteristic of the signifying chain, the manifestation of the unconscious in every subject" (Evans, 1996, p. 191). The novel illustrates this by showing how the repeated dream of corpse washing signifies the insistence of this signifier in Jawad's psyche, even though he attempts to distance himself from it. In the dream about Reem, for instance, she repeatedly says: "Wash me first so we can be together and then ..." (Antoon, 2013, p. 10). Not only does Jawad experience this dream multiple times, but within the dream, Reem herself repeats the demand to be washed. This repetition underscores the persistence of the signifier, the washer of corpses, and its insistence on remaining central to Jawad's unconscious, both in waking life and in dreams.

After examining Jawad's fragmented identity through Lacan's three orders, it becomes clear that this division begins in the mirror stage, in the gap between his truly divided body and the illusory image of wholeness. This fragmentation and alienation then continue into the symbolic order, where the subject enters the social system of meaning, yet no signifier can fully articulate the truth of his position and desires. Furthermore, signs of this fragmented identity also appear in Jawad's dreams. All of this raises an important question: how does this divided identity, rooted in a lack of being and in the gaps across all orders, lead to Jawad's desires, especially his desire to migrate? This question will be examined in the next part.

#### **Desire for Migration relating to objet petit a**

The concept of desire is one of the crucial notions that Lacan proposes. As Dylan Evans states, "desire is simultaneously the heart of human existence" (Evans, 1996, p. 37). Evans adds that Lacan discusses unconscious desire, not conscious desire. This means that in psychoanalysis, what is important is "to teach the subject to bring this desire into existence" (1966, p. 37). In other words, the subject must articulate and give a name to what resides in the unconscious. However, because the subject can never fully express unconscious desire, "there is always a leftover, a surplus" (1966, p. 37) that remains beyond speech. Similarly, Jawad seeks to articulate his unconscious desires for freedom and independence. His aspiration to become an artist serves as one means of expressing these desires; nevertheless, they can never be entirely fulfilled.

In the chosen text, it is observed throughout the novel that Jawad harbors desires for freedom, creativity, and independence. These desires are evident when he resists continuing his father's profession; he longs to free himself from ritual obligations and cultural norms, seeking instead an independent path where he can work creatively. Jawad, when he wants to express his desire for freedom, brings it and names it in the external world; as Sinan Antoon shows, he names these desires as the desire to be an artist. He tells Reem, his beloved, "I had decided not to follow in his footsteps and insisted on studying art" (Antoon, 2013, p. 48). His rejection of his father's path not only signifies his desire for independence and self-determination but also reflects his unconscious drive toward unity and wholeness, toward being independent from his father's legacy. To achieve this sense of completion, he even aspires to continue his education abroad. Significantly, throughout the novel, Jawad references only Western artists, such as Picasso, suggesting that his awareness of the lack and limitations in Iraq's artistic field intensifies his desire to seek opportunities elsewhere. Thus, it is crucial to note that all of Jawad's articulated desires ultimately point back to the fundamental desire for wholeness, a desire rooted in the unconscious. As Lacan asserts, every subject strives to overcome the lack of being that constitutes the self.

In this novel, Jawad's desire for freedom and being unified is never-ending; it remains eternal, and he continually seeks it. In this regard, Evans, drawing on Lacan, emphasizes that "desire can never be satisfied; it is constant in its pressure, and eternal" (38). At one point, Jawad expresses this desire by pursuing work as an artist and resisting his father's profession. At another, his longing for freedom and wholeness manifests as a desire to migrate, as he perceives Baghdad as "hell" (Antoon, 2013, p. 175) and yearns to escape its war and violence. As Muthanna Al Janabi argues, the term "hell" functions as "a metonym of both Baghdad and an alienating space" (Antoon, 2013, p. 21). One reason Antoon employs the metaphor of "hell" to describe Baghdad is the political situation of the time. Sinan Antoon specifically refers to the Communist movement in



Iraq, when the Ba'athist regime consolidated power and began arresting and imprisoning Communists. Within Jawad's own family, his uncle Sabri, who sympathized with the Communist cause, was forced to leave Iraq (Antoon, 2013, p. 83). The danger was so severe that "a number of Communist officers in the army had been executed" one night (Antoon, 2013, p. 82). In response, Jawad's father thanks God for his brother's safety (Antoon, 2013, p. 83). These circumstances stir deep questions in Jawad, as he continually wonders about his uncle's fate, his life abroad, and his occupation. Thus, the pervasive lack of security in Iraq intensifies Jawad's desire to migrate.

It should be noted that, on one hand, when Lacan refers to the concept of *lack*, he means the lack of being rather than the absence of an object; on the other hand, "desire is not a relation to an object, but a relation to a lack" (Evans, 1996, p. 38). The infant, in the mirror stage, first experiences this lack when encountering its own reflection: the fantasy of a unified, whole image contrasts with the fragmented reality of the body. Similarly, this lack of being is observable in Jawad during his process of identity formation. He feels this internal fragmentation, particularly at the beginning of his work as a corpse washer, when he must rely on the guidance of his father and his assistant, Hammoudy. His father instructs him to "just watch him and Hammoudy at the job for a number of weeks" (Antoon, 2013, p. 21), underscoring Jawad's initial dependency. At the same time, through his mother's words, "It's a very honorable profession and those who do it are rewarded by God" (Antoon, 2013, p. 14), Jawad perceives the image of wholeness embodied in his father and aspires to identify with him. Thus, a gap emerges in Jawad between his fragmented bodily experience prior to becoming a corpse washer and the imaginary wholeness represented by his father. Because this gap is perpetual, the desire to fill it becomes eternal. Consequently, the desire for wholeness never ends but continues to define the subject from within. With his statement that "the wholeness of the image threatens the subject with fragmentation, and the mirror stage thereby gives rise to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image" (Antoon, 2013, p. 118), Evans highlights that this gap and the tension it produces are perpetual. For this reason, Jawad, who at first admired his father's profession, later grew reluctant to follow it, but ultimately returned to it in the end.

One of the reasons for Jawad's marriage is achieving the "piece" (Antoon, 2013, p. 102), which symbolizes his attempt to attain a sense of wholeness. To explain the fundamental desire for wholeness, Lacan introduces the crucial notion of *objet petit a*. These are not the actual objects of desire; rather, they "represent a variety of partial objects in different partial drives" (Evans, 1996, p. 38). Elsewhere, Lacan describes them as a "semblance of being" (Evans, 1996, p. 178). In other words, on the path toward the ultimate desire for wholeness, the attempt to fill the lack of being, the subject encounters multiple substitute desires. Each of these desires gestures toward closing the gap but never fully satisfies it. Similarly, in his pursuit of wholeness, Jawad carries with him a series of desires that function as *objets petit a*. One such desire is his wish to marry Reem, his beloved. As mentioned earlier, Jawad at one point tells her that the reason for marriage is that "I just got an idea for a piece" (Antoon, 2013, p. 102), implying that the act of creating the "piece" represents his quest for a sense of completeness. For this reason, Jawad remains bound to Reem, even after her disappearance. He confesses: "Even though I had graduated many years ago, I kept visiting the academy to meet Reem" and "Even after Reem's sudden departure to Jordan, I still went there" (Antoon, 2013, p. 73). Following her departure, Jawad spends much of his time at "Ufuq café" (Antoon, 2013, p. 101), searching for Reem on the Internet. His persistent longing reveals how Reem, as an *objet petit a*, embodies an unattainable promise of wholeness that continues to structure his desire. For Jawad, completeness is bound to the possibility of being with Reem. Thus, when he cannot marry her and his mother advises him instead to marry Ghayda, he confesses his inability to move on. In response to her question, "Is she still in your heart?" Jawad replies truthfully, "I don't have a heart anymore" (Antoon, 2013, p. 147). This response underscores his recognition of the lack without Reem; without her, the imagined wholeness he longs for remains unattainable.

A second *objet petit a* can be seen in Jawad's desire to complete his education abroad, which further intensifies his wish to migrate. Jawad explicitly articulates this longing when he states, "my dream was to study art abroad, in Italy or somewhere else" (Antoon, 2013, p. 94). The pursuit of education and artistic refinement becomes, for him, a step closer to the imagined wholeness he seeks. Throughout the novel, Jawad repeatedly expresses this aspiration: "I had been seriously thinking of continuing to study sculpture abroad" (Antoon, 2013, p. 101). Yet, he acknowledges the difficulty of realizing this dream, noting that "getting a scholarship was not easy" (Antoon, 2013, p. 101). Importantly, Jawad's desire to migrate is not motivated



solely by educational aspirations but also by economic concerns. Another *objet petit a* emerges in his wish to improve his financial situation. After the American invasion, his wages proved insufficient to support a new life with his beloved Reem. This financial instability, along with the stigma of his father's profession, causes Reem's father to hesitate in accepting Jawad's marriage proposal. Jawad himself admits that her father's reluctance was due to both his "father's profession" and his "financial situation" (Antoon, 2013, p. 107). Reem, however, reassures her father by explaining that Jawad "intended to travel abroad and do graduate studies" (Antoon, 2013, p. 107), presenting migration as a solution to both problems. Thus, Jawad experiences a double lack, educational and financial, that he seeks to overcome in order to attain the imagined state of wholeness.

Finally, it can be said that through these *objets petit a* and the continual movement among Jawad's desires, such as the wish to marry his beloved, the wish to escape his father's profession, the wish to study abroad, and even the wish to migrate, Jawad's pursuit of wholeness is revealed. This is why Evans, based on Lacan, states "desire is a metonymy" (1996, p. 39). As a poststructuralist, Lacan "links metonymy to displacement" in Freud's terminology (Evans, 1996, p. 140). In this sense, all of these articulated desires function as *objets petit a*, mediating Jawad's deeper, unending desire for wholeness.

### Conclusion

This study, based on Jacques Lacan's theory of fragmented identity, examined the representation of such fractured subjectivity in human beings, with particular focus on the protagonist of Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. This study proves that Jawad embodies a fragmented identity that compels him toward the desire for migration. This fractured sense of self can be traced through the developmental stages of identity formation, namely the Mirror Stage and the Symbolic Order. The symptoms of such an identity, as Lacan suggests, are not only perceptible through moments of awakening, but also are seen within dreams.

This fragmented identity refers to a fundamental sense of lack. In fact, a lack of being that emerges in comparison with the other. According to Lacan, this lack is the very foundation of desire, a drive toward whatever might appear capable of filling the void. Jawad believes that emigration from Iraq will remedy this emptiness: by leaving, he imagines he will reunite with his beloved abroad, complete his education, and fulfill his professional aspirations. Yet he remains unaware that this fractured identity inevitably endures, and that the void it generates can neither be completely filled nor permanently erased. Even, as a result of this divided identity, Jawad ultimately returns to his father's occupation of corpse washing; however, the aspiration for migration remains within him.

Thus, in world and contemporary literature, works that address migration, diaspora, and trauma often emerge as a response to the effects of colonialism. This literature not only engages with the textual content but also with writers who have themselves experienced migration, whether producing their work inside or outside their homeland. In this context, the idea of migration can be analyzed through a Lacanian lens. The contribution of this article lies precisely in this approach, with its originality residing in the connection it establishes between the concept of migration and Lacanian theory.

### Works cited

Al Janabi, M. (2025). "Iraqis and the Palm Trees. Who Represents Whom?: Historicized Narratives in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*." *Al-Adab Journal*, no. 152, suppl., Mar. University of Baghdad, College of Arts. E-ISSN: 2706-9931, P-ISSN:1994-473X. doi:10.31973/7q9m9f40.

Al-Omar, N. A. (2018). "Cultural Identity in Sinan Antoon's Self-Translated *The Corpse Washer*." *International Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 8, no. 2. Canadian Center of Science and Education, doi:10.5539/ijel.v8n2p215.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23851/mjs.v36i3.1670>



- Antoon, S. (2013). *The Corpse Washer. Translated from the Arabic by the author, Yale University Press.*
- Dar, A. (2022). "On the Relationship Between Literature and Psychology." *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 8, October .
- Evans, D. (1996). *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis.* Routledge.
- Fearon, J. D. (1999, December). *What is identity (as we now use the word)?* Stanford University.
- Hossain, M. M. (2017). "Psychoanalytic Theory Used in English Literature: A Descriptive Study." *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: G, Linguistics & Education*, vol. 17, no. .
- Lacan, J. (1966). *Écrits: A Selection.* Éditions du Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (1988). *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: Book II, 1954– 1955.* Translated by Sylvana Tomaselli, with notes by John Forrester, W.W. Norton & Company.
- Mahmoud, R. (2016). "War and Violence in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer.*" *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, Mar. Australian International Academic Centre, doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.2.
- Mankhi, A. H. (2020). "Prolonged War Trauma in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer.*" *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, vol. 12, no. 5,. Innovation, Creativity and Change, vol. 12, no. 5, 2020, pp. 88–102. .
- Momeni, J. (2017). "Reading Difference in Identity: Lacanian Reasoning in Paul Auster's *Invisible.*" *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, June , Australian International Academic Centre, Australia. ISSN 2203-4714.
- Teng, X. (2024). "Research on Lacan's Theory of Desire." *Proceedings of 3rd International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies, Seaver College, Pepperdine University, .*
- Yebra, J. M. (2022). "Necropolitics in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer.*" *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, , pp. 96–114. University of Zaragoza, doi:10.35360/njes.741.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23851/mjs.v36i3.1670>





### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to institution, for the moral support provided during the course of this research. The encouragement and guidance provided by the institution have helped tremendously in completing this research.

### References

