

Literature as Historical Testimony: New Historicist Perspectives on Post-2003 Iraq in The Corpse Washer and The Iraqi Christ

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الأدب بوصفه شهادة تاريخية: مقاربات التاريخانية الجديدة حول العراق ما بعد ٢٠٠٣ في روايتي غسال الجثث والعراقي

المسيحي

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the importance of the Iraqi novels in exploring the events in Iraq, as a result of the past events. Likewise, the study investigates the past social, political, economic and cultural events and how the historical environment influences on our life and how the historical events chart the way of life. It also aims to analyze two narratives: *The Corpse Washer* and *The Iraqi Christ* depending on the New Historicism Theory. Thus, New Historicism is a theory that is introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in a highly associated with the political, social and economic elements. The theory is distinguished from other theories by its way of criticizing and analysing the literary work. In this study, there is an illustration of new historicism theory with considered to the relationship between the history and the literary work that regarded as a historical text. The researcher follows the qualitative methods of selecting and analysing the data of the study. The researcher also adopts the New Historicism Model by Greenblatt (2000). As a result, the researcher finds that the historical events cannot be separated from nowadays life; due to the way of influencing on the people and the effect of peoples' previous experiences about things that impact on the thoughts and ideology as well as the behaves.

Keywords: New historicism, qualitative, social, economic, political, Green blatt

المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص أهمية الرواية العراقية في استكشاف الأحداث التي شهدها العراق نتيجة للأحداث الماضية. كما تسعى إلى تتبع السياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية والثقافية السابقة، وبيان كيفية تأثير البيئة التاريخية في حياتنا المعاصرة، وكيف تعمل الأحداث التاريخية على رسم مسار الحياة. كذلك تهدف إلى تحليل سرديتين عراقيتين هما: *غسال الجثث* و*المسيحي العراقي* بالاستناد إلى نظرية التاريخانية الجديدة. تُعدّ التاريخانية الجديدة نظرية قَدَمها ستيفن غرينبلات، وترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالمعطيات السياسية والاجتماعية والاقتصادية. وتمتاز هذه النظرية عن غيرها بأسلوبها في نقد وتحليل العمل الأدبي. وفي هذه الدراسة، يجري توضيح مفهوم التاريخانية الجديدة في ضوء العلاقة بين التاريخ والعمل الأدبي بوصفه نصّاً تاريخياً. ويتبع الباحث المنهج النوعي في اختيار وتحليل بيانات الدراسة، كما يعتمد نموذج التاريخانية الجديدة لغرينبلات (٢٠٠٠). وخلصت الدراسة إلى أنّ الأحداث التاريخية لا يمكن فصلها عن واقع الحياة المعاصرة؛ لما تتركه من أثر مباشر على الناس، وتأثير التجارب السابقة في تشكيل الفكر والأيدولوجيا وكذلك السلوك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخانية الجديدة، المنهج النوعي، الاجتماعي، الاقتصادي، السياسي، غرينبلات.

Introduction

No one can separate Iraq from its history; due to the great history of this country, including cultural, religious, political and\ or economic. This history can be found in historical books as well as in the minds and thoughts

of the Iraqi people, who reflect their previous experiences in stories. Therefore, many authors try to write about Iraq and reflect the country's suffering through history. Thus, the history and literature are cooperating together; they have distinguished relationship in revealing the truth. Greenblatt states that the literature work is not something isolated from other events, but it is the series of works that sequence according to specific time as a part of the history. Additionally, the producing of any literary work is affected by the historical circumstances. Hence, the novel of Sinan Antoon and Hassan Blasim reflect the ability to use history in the description of new events. Since the history is not only something that happened in the past and end without effect; we as an audience can easily recognize the effect of the history on the events on those two novels. Moreover, the New Historicism theory as a way of studying and analyzing literary work is depended on the recognizing and interpreting of the context not only the text. It means that in this study the researcher analyses the full context with all its aspects. This study; have many facts about events and some activities in Iraq, whether in the past before 2003 or after this date. The following is an illustration of the New Historicism theory by Greenblatt, with referring to the elements and principles of analyzing the literary work according to this theory concerning the two novels the data of this study.

Historicism and New Historicism

New Historicism can be defined as the school of literary theory which joins the critical theory into easier methods of practice for theoretical literary philosophers. Thus, this theory is firstly developed in 1980, by the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt. Moreover, new Historicists aim to understand the literary work over its cultural context and to understand the intellectual history through literature (William 173). Historicism is a term that is related to history, the term Historismus is introduced firstly by the philosophers as notes on philosophy in 1797 by Friedrich Schlegel. In the nineteenth century, this term is used in Germany. Furthermore, it means a methodological rule for the historical events or philosophy (Iggers 130). Thus, to understand things in a specific period; there is a need to take into account these things in historical context. Iggers states that Historicism is a theory that seeks to explain the social, or cultural events including the beliefs and ideas by the study of the history in which these events happened. Moreover, it is the process that investigates the effect of the local factors on regional development. Simultaneously, New Historicism is a literary theory that was firstly introduced by Greenblatt 1980. This theory was influenced by the philosophy of Foucault. Thus, the theory aims to find the information in the text by taking into account the context of presenting a certain text, which explores the historical ideas and social issues in a specific time and place. Therefore, the historical study attracts many philosophers and scientists due to the relying on the responses or thinking of traditional and the thinkers (Reynolds). Poorghorban explains that Greenblatt's New Historicism is a theory in the analysis of literature, that is concerned with the role of the context and the impact of the socio-cultural elements as well as the events, taking into account the past source of these events that cause the current one (Poorghorban 44-46). This theory studies the political, economic, cultural and social factors. Therefore, the events that actually happened in the present time of presenting them in the literary work; can be known from the cultural context of the past. Additionally, Greenblatt criticizes the old historicism in the sense that it wasn't objectivist. The problem is that in the old historicism there is a description and interpretation of the past. Therefore, the relation between the old and new historicism can be studied in the comparison between the literary studies in the past and recent times and in the different points of view about the nature of the history. Hence, Greenblatt emphasizes on the history of the historian, he claims that the history can be considered as it appeared if there is a description of the dialogue in the past because every moment is distinguished by a specific conflict of voices in the past (Balkaya 7068-7077).

Sinan Antoon

Sinan Antoon is an Iraqi author. He was born in Baghdad 1967, his father is Iraqi and his mother is American. He is immigrated to America in 1991, and then he completes his studies there. He leaves Iraq escaped from the destruction and all bad events. Antoon is a novelist and poet; his works are concerned with the exploring of the suffering of Iraq and its people. In his speech to AL-Alam AL-Jadeed journal he describes his love to Iraq " Iraq that I left, but do not leave me" (AL-Qasemy). Additionally, in his literary work he describes the sectarian as the things that rip the country into Sunni and Shiite. Thus, in his novels he drives through history in search of the truth and answers for his questions. Therefore, all his novels are description to the history and how people differ in their ways of interpreting the history. In his talking about history Antoon claims that we as human need the history to prove our truth, or support us when we talk about past events.

Summary of the Novel *The Corpse Washer*:

It is a novel that reflects the suffering of the Iraqi people before and after 2003. This novel was translated into English by the author Sinan Antoon. The author uses the hero of the novel named Jawad to reflect the inner and outer conflict in a man, when he rejects to follow the rules whether social, political, cultural and economic. With the author's detail description of the job of the family as washer for the corpse, Sinan illustrates the cultural and religious ritual of washing the bodies of dead people. He explains how the death increased in Iraq after 2003 and how the events became worst. Jawad's father is the owner of the place of washing the corpse, he inherits this job from his families and he wants Jawad to be just like him. Instead, Jawad is fond for art and he wants to be a famous artist, just like "Jawad Saleem" (Antoon 47), as he told his teacher one day. The fate leads him to stay among the dead people in his family's place of work. Moreover, Jawad fails in achieving his goals to be a famous artist, he also fails in his planning to immigrate and he fails in love with the two pretty girls that appear in different period of times in the novel: Mariam and Qhaidaa'. Sequentially, the novel reflects the cultural, social, political, economic and religious events in Iraq. In this sense, the appearance of the hero's brother Ammori and his good relation and personality, and his success in educations reveals the social connection. While the death of Amoori who was one of the Iraqi armies; reflects the political events in Iraq that moves from war to another war (Antoon 7-255). Finally, this novel is one of the most important literary works of Antoon, due to the way of reflecting the reality of Iraq and the suffering of its people. The struggle between the fate and hopes, the love and parting, the poverty and richness and the peace and bloods can easily be recognized by the readers.

Hassan Blasim

He is an Iraqi author and poet who born in Baghdad 1973. He is residing in Finland. Blasim writes many literary works including books in the field of poetry, cinema and fiction. He also has many stories that have been translated from Arabic into English. In 2000 Blasim left Iraq escaping from persecution because of his works. In 2004 he was settled in Finland. He has many important works that reflects the Iraqi reality. As well as the needs and suffering of the Iraqi people, one of those works is *The Iraqi Christ*.

Summary of the Novel *The Iraqi Christ*

In this story the narrator is called Ali; he told us a story about his friend Daniel both is dead. Daniel is a Christian soldier, he refuses to leave Iraq after 2003 and he wants to stay in Iraq taking care of his mother after her losing of her sight and the ability to hear. Daniel's friends in the army were called his "Chew-gum Christ" (Blasim 94). Moreover, after 2003 when he refused to leave Iraq, he also refused to return to the army with Ali and other friends. One day Daniel with his mother in a restaurant eating their favoriourate food. In the restaurant there was a man sitting next to Daniel, he showed him the explosive belt that he was wear and asked Daniel to follow him to the bathroom of the restraint. Then the man threatening Daniel with gun and asked him to take his role by wearing the explosive belt. The man told Daniel that he will take care of his mother. The Christ didn't have another option; the man told his that if Daniel changes his mind, they will kill his mother. Thus, Daniel decided to do this mission. Therefore, when the man left the bathroom, "the Christ fell to his knee..." he opened the bathroom and shouted, someone saw him and screamed suicidal! So, people escaped immediately Daniel looked to the place of his mother, she wasn't there then he pressed the button (Blasim 1-100)

Methodology

This study is about the new historical use in the two narratives, *The Corpse Washer* and *The Iraqi Christ*. The study is a qualitative one that serves in selecting the data from non-numerical number of data that makes the result reliable and objective. The data are two narratives: *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon and *The Iraqi Christ* by Hassan Blasim. They are selected carefully to explore the importance use of historical elements in representing the nowadays events. Reading the two novels makes the researcher analyze the events depending on new historicism theory that emphasis on the cultural, social, political, religious and economic contexts. The following is the theoretical framework of the study in the analysis of the two novels depends on the theory of Greenblatt (2000).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the data analysis is adopting of the Greenblatt's theory of New Historicism (2000).

Data Analysis

The Corpse Washer* and *The Iraqi Christ

In the corpse washer, Sinan Antoon echoes his previous experiences about the past events in Iraq, whether these events are social, political, economic and\ or cultural. Handily, the author's reflection can be recognized by the readers in each part as the cooperation between the past and recent events. Thus, in the new historicism theory,

the events in both periods the past and new should be taken into account. Blasim also reflects his previous experiences about Iraq and the needs to of affiliation. He presents the character of Ali and Daniel who were from different religious, but they were best friends. The novel explores the bad events in Iraq and the sequences of wars and death.

The Political Context

The political events in *The Corpse Washer* in the past were under the rule of AL-Ba'ath which is described by the author several times in the reflection of the poor and high social classes, and the instruction towards any other parties such as Jawad's uncle when he was from AL-Shywai party the author describes these events during the rule of Saddam and after 2003 in the returning of his uncle to visit them. The sequences of the events can be recognized as a result of the past once. Thus, Antoon uses martyrdom as a result of the political events in Iraq which produces death everywhere. Moreover, the unity cannot be found between people in Iraq immediately after 2003, when the author describes the sectarian killing in the streets and the blood everywhere. As a result, to the bad political events that a person faced in the past and during 2003 many Iraqi people decided to immigrate into other countries and one of them our hero in the novel Jawad who do not feel with the affiliation to Iraq as well as the feelings of fear of death and the needs for safety. Additionally, these political elements can also do be recognized in the novel of Blasim, when he starts his novel *The Iraqi Christ* by events in the army. Thus, the novel from early starting moments pays the readers' attention to the message of his work. Daniel and his friends were dead as the audience understand by the narrator of the story Ali, who was dead also. The death and blood, the bumps and explosives are the words that commonly used in Iraq. Therefore, audiences are easily judge that there is no peace, no safety in our country at that time.

The Social Context

The social context in *The Corpse Washer* is one of the clearest points in Antoon's novel. Starting with a mix of old and new occurrences that entices readers to keep track of what's going on and encourages them to infer what's going on. The social joining between Jawad and his brother Amoori which ends after the death of Amoori is a kind of the past social relations between the families, when each one has a responsibility towards his neighbor. The author describes the social relationships between Amoori who is the hero's brother and his family as well as the polite personality of Amoori that is created in the past and affects positively in Amoori's attitudes and behavior in his society. Besides, the new historicism emphasizes the relationship of the philosophy when the author choices the songs in such a way that reflects the hidden meaning whether related to Jawad or his environment when Jawad describes the song that as if it comes from the past. " I felt the song was coming from a distant world which was not yet submerged in death" (Antoon 22). Moreover, the response against the social rules including the field of study and the way of life is a kind of social context which shows the hero's reaction. Furthermore, the behaves of the people in the past and at the time of the events represents their social connection in Iraq and how the Iraqi people cooperate with each other whether in the past or nowadays, in the peace or wars. The thoughts of the main characters in the novel are divided into two sides: one side is with the social rules and the other is our hero who struggles between his needs and society. Similarly, Blasim's novel is a reflection of the social context in Iraq before and after 2003; it reflects the close relationship between friends in the army and after 2003 when Ali tried to convince Daniel to rejoin the army. The description of Daniel's relation with his mother and how her choice to stay with her in Iraq; is a kind of great social connection in the Iraqi families and between the Iraqi people. This social connection does not change due to the political conflict, or the politician's disagreement. Thus, the Iraqi peoples' thoughts stand against the storm of wars through history; they have a great connection just like the history of Tigris and Euphrates. Therefore, the two novelists visualize the Iraqi society from the past until nowadays as one hand in peace and wars and all the conflicts, battles and explosives are from another people who do not want this country and its people to live in safety.

Cultural Context

Antoon gives an expanding description for different phases of culture in his novel. Thus, the language is used by the Iraqi people in their communication with each other, or to label things in the environment. Sometimes these things' names are inherited from predecessors. Similarly, the habits of Jawad's family in their daily life and the habits that is must be followed in the washing of the dead people are types of some society's culture. In addition, Antoon visualizes the art, by shedding a light towards the great Iraqi artists for instance Jawad Salim, in the speech of the Jawad the hero of the novel and his teacher about the art. Moreover, the author uses the songs as a type of art and culture in the past, which can be described as nice and hopeful songs that have an impact on the soul and the thoughts of Jawad. Despite of the development of life and culture the author presents

the traditions of the Iraqi society that is related to the washing of the dead people, other traditions related with the opinion of Jawad's father towards art and how the father wanted Jawad to take the family's job.

In Blasim's novel there is a hence to the cultural context when the Iraqi people with their different cultures, experiences and habits live together in peace, for instance, Christianity and Islam.

Religious Context

Blasim's description of the religious aspect in Iraq is related with the Christians feeling that they are minorities after 2003. Thus, the Christians were afraid to make their religious rituals in churches. Therefore, most of them are immigrated outside Iraq, as Blasim mentions when all the relatives of Daniel immigrate except him who choice to stay in Iraq with his mother. Furthermore, religion expresses the unity between individuals and do not separate them. So, the relationship between the friends in the army is good evidence of that unity. Religious also in the novel reflects the morality and good behavior; when Daniel was taking care of his old mother.

In Antoon's novel, there are different phases of religious aspects which are results of the past events or activities. Such as the things that are related with the washing the dead bodies according to doctrines. The readers can realize that Shiite doctrine differs from Sunni doctrine in this matter. So, there is a place for washing the dead people for each doctrine. Although these aspects are types of historical, legacy and religious. However, it doesn't separate the people in the same country in their reality. Antoon accurately describes the phrases that are used while washing the dead. Finally, in his description of the walls, Antoon relates the walls with their drawers that were affected by the past which makes the walls wet. The other of Antoon's descriptions reflect the ending of the green seasons when the leaves dry and drop as a result of the summer and its hot days, just like the summer of Jawad's life in Iraq that reflects the life of all the Iraqi people. The two narratives are results of the events in the past that shape and reflect the circumstances as well as it is the response that is influenced by the environment. Therefore, the environment in those two novels reflects the bad events in Iraq which are results of events in the past.

Conclusion

The life of people cannot be separated from their previous history. Thus, the history shapes the events with all their details whether happy or sad. In this sense, the events in Iraq are results of the past events which effect on each detail and actions in our life. Moreover, the New Historicism theory emphases on the role of the environment as well as the history of a person. Therefore, in this study the researcher finds that the history plays important role in the shaping of new events whether political, cultural, social, economic and religious. Moreover, the violent history of Iraq and the suffering of the Iraqi people among the corpse and destruction effect on the way of presenting the two novels. Therefore, with considering to the context that yield from the idea of many social, political, cultural and economic assumptions the audiences can easily recognize the inner and outer conflict. This impacting is just like the previous experiences, beliefs, attitudes and\ or ideology that draws the reality of events. Furthermore, in the two novels in this study, the history of Iraq draws the peoples' life. For instance, in Antoon's novel the events that reflect the suffering of the Iraqi people during the rule of AL-Ba'ath control the events after 2003, especially the social, political, cultural events. Hence, the readers can easily interpret the situation as if these new events are the results of the past accumulations, or the result of the past inculcation activities. Additionally, the researcher finds that Blasim's novel successes in revealing the suffering of Iraqi people whether Christians or Muslims, both life in a country that full with pains, bloods, explosives and battles. These events are results of the previous events that Iraq faced. Similarly, the environments of presenting the events and the historical background of the main character are shaped the better sight for the novel and good recognizing of the message behind this novel. Finally, it is important to say that the two works by Antoon and Blasim are important works by their role of sending a message about the suffering of the Iraqi people before and after 2003, which makes people from other countries realize what the Iraqi people are facing. So, those two novels even though their novelists are immigrated from Iraq, but their hearts and thoughts stay related with the past to produce the new sight about the history and its relation with new events.

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