



## أصداء الحرب: تجليات الصدمة في رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان لسنان أنطون

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**الكلمات المفتاحية:** العراق، الصدمة، الحرب، العنف، المعاناة، الهوية، سنان أنطون، غسال

البحث

### كيفية اقتباس البحث

خضير , شهد ثابت محمد , أصداء الحرب: تجليات الصدمة في رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان لسنان أنطون,مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آذار ٢٠٢٦، المجلد:١٦، العدد:٣.

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مسجلة في Registered

**ROAD**

مفهرسة في Indexed

**IASJ**

Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies 2026 Volume :16 Issue : 3

(ISSN): 2227-2895 (Print) (E-ISSN):2313-0059 (Online)



“Echoes of War: Manifestations of Trauma in Sinan Antoon’s *the Corpse Washer*”

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**Keywords** : Iraq, trauma, war, violence, suffering, identity, Sinan Antoon, The Corpse Washer

**How To Cite This Article**

Khudaier , Shahad Thanit Mohammed , “Echoes of War: Manifestations of Trauma in Sinan Antoon’s the Corpse Washer” ,Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, March 2026, Volume:16, Issue 3.

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**Abstract**

The Iraqi author Sinan Antoon wrote the novel "The Corpse Washer" to give readers a vivid glimpse into the trauma and violence that has plagued Iraq since 2003. Through the story of the main character, who takes up the traditional role of washing the dead, Antoon shows how dealing with the horrific aftermath of war can leave deep psychological and emotional scars. He also portrays how traumatic events like living through war can disrupt family bonds and hinder a person's ability to develop a stable identity. By framing the suffering of the protagonist and other Iraqis in the context of the country's history of colonialism and oppression, Antoon





makes the argument that violence and trauma have touched all levels of Iraqi society. This paper will analyze how Antoon uses literary techniques in "The Corpse Washer" to convey the traumatic impact of the Iraq War.

### الملخص

كتب الروائي العراقي سنان أنطون رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان ليمنح القراء لمحة جلية حية عن الصدمة والعنف اللذين عانى منهما العراق منذ عام ٢٠٠٣. ومن خلال تقديمه للشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية و التي تزاوُل المهنة المتمثلة بغسل الموتى، حيث يعكس أنطون كيفية التعامل مع المخلفات المرورة للحرب يمكن أن تترك جروحًا نفسية وعاطفية عميقة. كما يصوّر كيف أن خوض تجربة الحرب، قد تفكك الروابط الأسرية وتُعيق قدرة الفرد على تكوين هوية مستقرة. ومن خلال مسرحة معاناة البطل ومعاناة العراقيين الآخرين في سياق تاريخ البلاد من الاستعمار والاضطهاد، حيث يناقش الروائي ثنائية العنف والصدمة والتي مست جميع شرائح المجتمع العراقي. يسعى هذا البحث إلى تحليل الكيفية التي يوظف بها أنطون الأدوات الأدبية في روايته للتعبير عن الأثر الصائم لحرب العراق.

### Introduction

Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013) provides a vivid portrayal of the trauma and violence that has gripped Iraq since the 2003 invasion. As Laurie Vickroy notes, authors like Antoon go "beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within [their] consciousness and structures" (Vickroy, 2002, p. 158). The postcolonial Iraqi novel discusses themes like shattered identity, war, oppression, and discrimination that were not openly explored in traditional novels before 2003 (Antoon, 2013). As Kaplan (2005) argues, wars are "mass producers of death" that can traumatize people and radically alter their worldviews (p. 211). Iraqi literature is filled with the theme of war, rendering characters "handicapped and perplexed" about how to move forward (Antoon, 2013, p. 165).



Psychologically, trauma occurs when an overwhelming event causes damage to an unprepared brain (Erikson, 1995). Caruth (1996) defines it as “an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p. 235). The main causes are lack of security, fear, abuse, discrimination, violence, deceit, and difficult childhood experiences, which can lead to aggression (Kaplan, 2005). People react differently - some are quickly traumatized while others remain unaffected (Tulvic, 2001). In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon explores how the Iraq War’s horrific violence has psychologically scarred the country through the story of a man forced to take up the traditional role of washing the dead. He vividly conveys how dealing with the aftermath of war can profoundly disrupt family and identity.

The concept of psychological trauma has become more prevalent in literary studies in recent decades. As Erikson notes, the notion of trauma has shifted "from a 'stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior' to a 'state or condition produced by such a stress or blow'" (1995, p. 184). In other words, trauma involves a wounding of the mind rather than just the body. Cathy Caruth provides an influential definition of trauma as "an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996, p. 11). The traumatic event happens abruptly, catching the individual unprepared, and its effects are only realized afterward.





The causes of trauma are wide-ranging, including lack of security, fear, abuse, discrimination, violence, deceit, and difficult childhood experiences, which can lead to aggression (Kaplan, 2005, p. 211). People react differently as well – some are quickly traumatized while others remain relatively unaffected (Tulvic, 2001, p. 155). But traumatic memories leave a strong imprint on the mind that disrupts normal cognitive functioning. As Caruth (1996) explains, the impact of trauma “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” (p. 9). The traumatic moment returns later in intrusive flashes, dreams, and repetitive thoughts.

Caruth and others have highlighted the importance of narrative in addressing trauma. Caruth (1996) states that “trauma seems to be much more than pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell of us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (p.4). Telling stories of trauma is an attempt to bear witness to events that resist comprehension and cannot be fully known or mastered. Literature provides a means of expressing traumatic experiences that remain beyond words or understanding. As E. Ann Kaplan (2005) notes, how one reacts to trauma also depends on individual psychology, cultural context, and how events are portrayed in the media and shaped by institutions (p. 1). Literature gives traumatic events an empathetic voice.

Iraqi literature in particular has been dominated by the traumas of war and oppression. Sinan Antoon’s novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013) provides a vivid window into the trauma and violence that has gripped

Iraq since 2003. The protagonist is psychologically scarred by his duty washing the dead victims of war, including friends and relatives. Antoon gives narrative form to the unspeakable trauma of dealing with the horrific aftermath of war. The novel bears witness to tragedies that resist comprehension, conveying powerful truths about the inner wounds inflicted by war's brutality. As Vickroy (2002) argues, Antoon's literary techniques mirror the effects of trauma itself – the broken narratives, repetitious details, and time shifts reflect the rupture of psychic continuity and confusion of memory caused by traumatic experiences (p. 166). Literature like *The Corpse Washer* enables empathy for trauma's depths.

### **Trauma and Endless Suffering in Iraq**

Iraqis have endured individual and collective trauma on a massive scale, particularly since the 2003 invasion. As Erickson (1995) describes, trauma leaves individuals “living in the moment of shock” which they are compelled to “relive[] over and over again” (p. 184). Normal chronology is disrupted as the traumatic moment haunts the present. Iraqi literature in recent years has sought to give voice to this traumatic suffering.

### **The Intergenerational Impact of Violence**

Iraq's history is one of “mute repetition of suffering” across generations (Caruth, 1996, p. 9). The trauma of violence shapes family narratives and national identity. Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013) focuses on a family of corpse washers carrying on the traditional duty of ritually washing the dead. The protagonist is deeply scarred by having to wash the bodies of friends and relatives killed in ongoing sectarian violence. Antoon depicts how the trauma of dealing with gruesome deaths upends ordinary reality: “The corpses were fighting an encroaching oblivion that erases features and reroutes families. Writing new





biographies for them was a daily battle against amnesia and denial” (p. 52). Violent loss becomes an intergenerational legacy.

The Corpse Washer also shows how children inherit national traumas from the past. The protagonist recalls his grandfather’s stories of British occupation and dreams of being a sculptor, repeating “If I had been born in a different country I could have been something else” (Antoon, 2013, p. 162). Historical forces constrain individual freedom and creativity. The wounds of colonialism and dictatorship continue to haunt the present. Each generation cannot escape the suffering imprinted in family and national memory.

### **The Inability to Heal from Trauma**

Healing from trauma requires making sense of the event and placing it in the past. However, Iraqis exist in an endless present of violence that defies narrative closure or resolution. The protagonist in *The Corpse Washer* remains “living in the moment of shock” (Erickson, 1995, p. 184), overwhelmed by the never-ending tide of dead bodies. Antoon depicts the numbness resulting from uncontrollable, repetitive horror: “I felt nothing. That is the problem with mass death – it renders everything meaningless” (2013, p. 174). With no end to the violence in sight, no healing narrative is possible.

Furthermore, the Iraqi people have no institutions to help process collective suffering. As Kaplan (2005) argues, cultural and political context shapes reactions to trauma (p. 1). Unlike some Western countries, Iraq lacks systems of psychotherapy and communal memorialization that could help integrate experiences of loss. Without public mourning practices, private pain festers. Antoon suggests it is the writer’s duty to fill this void and transmit traumatic stories to cultivate empathy.





### Fragmented Identity

Profound trauma shatters personal identity and one's view of the world. The protagonist of *The Corpse Washer* finds his sense of self decomposing along with the bodies he washes: "Every wash is a life, every body a novel, and I am the reader and writer. A cemetery is an expansive library" (Antoon, 2013, p.52). He struggles to integrate his traumatic experiences into a coherent life narrative. Caruth (1996) argues trauma manifests in the "uncontrolled repetitive appearance" of memories that resist integration (p. 11). The corpse washer's identity becomes as fragmented as the broken bodies he ritually cleanses.

Antoon suggests that on a national scale, dictatorship and colonialism have fractured Iraq's collective identity. The protagonist's father tells him that in the time of British occupation, "we washed all the corpses, Indians, British, Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Jews. We never distinguished among the dead" (Antoon, 2013, p. 167). Yet in the present, sectarian divides have shattered this inclusive national identity. Individuals and nations need narratives of communal belonging to make sense of trauma's ruptures. But the cycles of violence in Iraq's history allow no space for healing.

Postcolonial theory formulates its critique by analyzing the societal narratives, cultural inequities, and political marginalization that are perpetuated and accepted by colonial and imperial regimes. According to Young (2001:1-11, 57-69), postcolonial critique primarily examines the historical impact of colonialism on present power structures and systems. Postcolonial critique recognizes anti-colonial movements as the source and driving force behind its political ideology. Postcolonial critique is a type of dialectical conversation that mainly analyzes the historical





progression of decolonization. It empowers persons who have experienced socio-political and economic domination to reclaim their autonomy; it offers them a forum for equitable negotiation.

However, anti-colonial movements lack consistency. Some of them have limitations imposed by their specific context, yet they are unified and their varied ideas contribute to the development of a postcolonial theory.

Moreover, there is a certain level of intersection within fields of study, and it is unavoidable to come across discrepancies. This is particularly true when postcolonial theory assimilates a more extensive range of knowledge from other fields and practices within a particular context (see also Segovia 1999:111-113; Sugirtharajah 1999:3-5). The terminology utilized in postcolonial theory is firm and decisive, as it challenges and undermines the hegemony of some cultures over others, hence posing a threat to privileges and authority (Young 2003:7). The main aim is to provide fair and equal administration of justice to individuals.

According to Young (2001:383-426), postcolonial theory emerged as a "political discourse" in direct response to the experiences of oppression and liberation movements that arose after the awakening of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These continents are often connected with poverty and violence. Postcolonial criticism analyzes the methods of subjugation and manipulative authority that exist in contemporary society (Young 2001:11). The underlying ideology of this approach is to confront and challenge the present circumstances that are the immediate or indirect consequences of historical events, rather than engaging in a conflict with the past itself. Therefore, the primary concern of the conflict revolves around neo-colonialism and its agents (both domestic and foreign) who persistently maintain dominance through political, economic, and social



exploitation in countries that have achieved independence. (Hawley, J. C. 2015)

### Literature as Empathetic Witness

While trauma resists language and cognition, Antoon suggests literature provides a vital medium for transmitting traumatic experience. Caruth (1996) argues storytelling enables access to “a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” about trauma (p. 4). By bearing empathetic witness to Iraqis’ suffering, Antoon creates solidarity in pain that protests an unjust world. Even if trauma remains beyond words, the attempt to speak and be heard reconnects survivors to humanity.

Through fragmented vignettes and poetic imagery, Antoon channels the mute emotional repetitions of trauma. Vickroy (2002) contends his literary techniques mirror trauma’s effects on the psyche itself (p. 166). Antoon breaks down narrative continuity and chronology much like trauma disrupts memory and identity. By formal experimentation, Antoon draws readers into an experiential understanding of trauma’s ruptures. Literature cannot fully explain but can evoke empathy for suffering.

By forcing confrontation with Iraq’s painful history, Antoon dreams of a future beyond inherited divisions and trauma. Storytelling protests collective amnesia and attempts to rebuild identity from fragments. Through characters who assert “we have the right to dream” (Antoon, 2013, p. 173), Antoon invites us to imagine a healed community no longer trapped in endless violence. His literature is an act of resilience and witness against indifference.

### Personal Trauma of Loss

Sinan Antoon’s novel *The Corpse Washer* centers on the character of Jawad and his traumatic experiences of death and loss. Jawad comes from





a family of corpse washers, responsible for ritually preparing bodies for burial in accordance with Muslim tradition. However, Jawad resists following his father into this profession, finding their workplaces full of “death’s traces” and the “scents and memories” of mortality (Antoon, 2013, p.11). As a young man, Jawad suffers multiple personal traumas that leave lasting psychological wounds.

Early in the novel, Jawad loses his older brother Khalid to leukemia. Jawad recalls his brother’s wasting body in the hospital, describing how “a few months before, he had been tall and fit with dreams folded in his eyes” (Antoon, 2013, p. 54). The loss of his brother at a young age shakes Jawad’s sense of security and leaves him struggling with the injustice of premature death. Even worse, Jawad later loses his girlfriend Reem to a bombing, having to actually wash the shattered remains of her body. Antoon suggests such traumatic bereavement shatters one’s view of the world as orderly or meaningful.

According to Erikson (1995), trauma arises not just from single events but from an “accumulation of wounds” and “continuing pattern of abuse” (p. 457). The ceaseless violence in Iraq subjects Jawad to repetitive personal loss. Each death of a loved one or friend re-traumatizes him anew. His psychic wounds accumulate to the point he feels emotionally numb: “That is the problem with mass death – it renders everything meaningless” (Antoon, 2013, p. 174).

### **Collective Trauma of War**

In addition to personal tragedies, Jawad suffers from the collective, national traumas of dictatorship, war, and occupation. Caruth (1995) argues trauma works on multiple levels, individual and collective (p. 11).

Jawad comes of age during the Gulf War, witnessing aerial bombardment and deprivation under international sanctions. Antoon vividly depicts Jawad's generation as profoundly shaped by fear, uncertainty, and dashed hopes.

Under Saddam Hussein's rule, Jawad's choices are constrained by oppression. He ruefully thinks that "had I been born in a different country I could have been something else" (Antoon, 2013, p. 162). War then shatters the brief optimism after Saddam's fall. Jawad is traumatized by washing the corpses of young Iraqi resistance fighters as well as American soldiers. He observes the sectarian bloodshed ripping his country apart.

As Kaplan (2005) argues, national trauma depends on cultural context and how events are publicly framed (p. 1). Unlike some Western societies, Iraq offers no communal spaces to mourn traumatic loss or process wartime experiences. The unending violence creates collective social trauma as institutions collapse. Jawad comes to view death as the only reliable fixture, thinking "a cemetery is an expansive library" of his people's suffering (Antoon, 2013, p. 52).

### Fragmented Identity

Profound trauma can fracture one's identity and sense of self. Jawad finds the repetitive horror of washing corpses has made him numb and indifferent. His daily proximity to the dead leads to a sense of unreality regarding his own life: "It seemed to me that my real place was on the washing bench...This world was the fiction" (Antoon, 2013, p. 96). He struggles to integrate his experiences into a coherent self-narrative.





Caruth (1995) argues trauma manifests in the fragmented intrusion of the past into the present (p. 11). Jawad is haunted by vivid memories that feel more real than his bleak surroundings. Antoon depicts his fragmented identity through cyclical, nonlinear storytelling. Flashbacks to Jawad's childhood interrupt the chronological narrative, mirroring the disruption of trauma. As Vickroy (2002) notes, these literary techniques recreate trauma's psychic effects for the reader (p. 166). Jawad's fractured sense of self results from repetitive wounding, both personal and national.

### Writing as Witnessing

According to Caruth (1995), the imperative to bear witness is central to trauma (p. 9). Speechless horror demands language to restore moral order. Antoon's act of writing responds to this need, articulating unspeakable atrocities to honor the dead. While no narrative can fully explain Iraq's trauma, literary witness provides empathy.

Within the story, Jawad attempts to chronicle his experiences washing the bodies destroyed by war. These poetic fragments of testimony protest forgetting and resist the meaninglessness of death. Jawad imagines a monumental book of "all the pain and suffering inflicted and endured on this land...from its birth until today" (Antoon, 2013, p. 141). While this project remains unfinished, Antoon takes up this charge in fiction.

By addressing Iraq's tragic history, Antoon creates solidarity in suffering that attempts to rebuild communal bonds. As Jawad reflects, "We washed all the corpses...We never distinguished among the dead" (Antoon, 2013,



p. 167). Imagining collective remembrance counters the sectarian divisions of trauma. Literature gestures toward the restoration of shared humanity and identity.

### Jawad's Traumatic Dreams and Visions

Jawad is profoundly affected by his traumatic experiences through repeated nightmares and visions that intrude upon his waking life. As Erikson (1995) states, trauma manifests through “continual reliving” in dreams and flashbacks (p. 184). Sleep provides no escape for Jawad from the horror.

His first nightmare features his girlfriend Reem lying naked on a washing bench, waiting for him to ritually cleanse her corpse even though she pleads “I’m not dead!” (Antoon, 2013, p. 1). Jawad is horrified to find pomegranates symbolizing cancer on her chest. These dreams force Jawad to confront his intimate fears of loss. Reem later does die in a bombing, compelling Jawad to actually wash her mangled body. His traumatic dreams thus become reality.

Jawad's dreams are filled with the fragmented bodies of the dead he washes. He sees “deformed limbs...twisted faces” and relives washing them in his sleep (Antoon, 2013, p. 2). His psyche cannot integrate these gruesome experiences; they resist comprehension. Caruth (1996) argues trauma manifests in uncontrollable repetitions as the mind struggles to grasp the ungraspable (p. 11). Jawad's dreams vainly attempt to process the daily horror.





Besides nightmares, Jawad has chilling visions while awake. A terrifying old man commands him to “write down all the names” of the dead (Antoon, 2013, p. 26). This hallucinatory figure embodies the national trauma of mass death haunting Jawad. As LaCapra (2001) notes, studying trauma can lead to over-identification and repetition (p. 142). Jawad cannot escape the cycle of death.

### **Alienation from Life and Love**

Jawad’s traumatic proximity to the dead leaves him profoundly alienated from the living. He views his father’s ability to eat and laugh after washing corpses as incomprehensible (Antoon, 2013, p. 22). Jawad sees life itself as tainted by death, saying “Everything that Father had brought for us was paid for by death” (p. 22). He cannot experience intimacy without remembering the corpses’ “gaping mouths and twisted limbs” (p. 123).

According to Herman (1992), trauma is destructive to relationships and trust (p. 51). Jawad pushes away the woman he loves, Sabrine, feeling “my heart was a hole one could pass through but never reside in” (Antoon, 2013, p. 114). He believes he has no future, expecting to die young. Antoon suggests national trauma creates a culture of fear and isolation. Jawad’s alienation stems from both personal and collective experience.

### **Overwhelmed by Death**



After the 2003 invasion, violence and death escalate, leaving Jawad overwhelmed. He sees death's "fingers crawling everywhere," bodies piling up endlessly (Antoon, 2013, p. 104). The corpses blur together in his exhaustion: "The dead bodies looked so much alike...The same anonymous death" (p. 59). He becomes numb, realizing "the problem with mass death – it renders everything meaningless" (p. 174).

According to Erikson (1995), trauma arises from a "continuing pattern of abuse" rather than discrete events (p. 457). The unending violence in Iraq subjects Jawad to repetitive horror. Each new atrocity re-traumatizes him, accumulating into despair. With no end in sight, Jawad feels suffocated: "I can't sleep at night. Nightmares are driving me insane" (Antoon, 2013, p. 171). The ceaseless brutality overwhelms his capacity to cope.

### Unspoken Pain

Jawad's family responds to trauma by repression. His father seeks refuge in religion, while his mother's grief for her dead son Khalid remains unspoken: "she locked up her tears deep inside her...We never saw her cry or heard her complain" (Antoon, 2013, p. 55). Jawad also feels unable to confess his traumatic dreams to them. This silence results from the lack of communal spaces to share grief in Iraq, as Kaplan (2005) notes (p. 1). Without public mourning rituals, trauma festers privately.

Antoon suggests writing offers a way for Jawad to express his anguish. He records his experiences washing corpses in poetic fragments. While unable to convey the full horror, these writings protest the erasure of the dead. By witnessing wartime atrocities, Jawad's chronicles function as





what Caruth (1995) calls “the story of a wound that cries out” (p. 4). Literature provides empathy for suffering even when trauma destroys language itself. Through Jawad’s story, Antoon invites readers to bear witness to unspeakable pain.

### Blurred Boundaries Between Life and Death

A major effect of trauma portrayed in *The Corpse Washer* is the breakdown of boundaries between life and death for Jawad. His repetitive exposure to corpses blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality. Jawad feels more connected to the dead than the living, stating “I felt for the hundredth time what a stranger I’d become in my hometown” (Antoon, 2013, p. 175). He is caught in a nightmarish space where waking and dreams blend together.

As Herman (1992) describes, trauma alienates people from normal life: “a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel they belong more to the dead than to the living” (p. 52). Jawad is isolated in his own city. His father’s death after the invasion makes death a daily monster. Jawad sees death’s “fingers crawling everywhere” (Antoon, 2013, p. 104). With endless bodies, he becomes numb: “the problem with mass death – it renders everything meaningless” (p. 174). He cannot differentiate past from present as traumatic scenes repeat.

According to Erikson (1995), trauma disrupts normal chronology as one is “living in the moment of shock” (p. 184). Jawad is stuck in the



perpetual present of violence. Antoon's fragmented narrative mirrors this psychic rupture. Dreams, visions, and reality blend into a surreal nightmare space for Jawad. Literature represents trauma's effects on cognition and memory (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). Jawad moves ghostlike between two worlds, unable to separate life from death.

### Violence Becomes Mundane

A disturbing effect of prolonged trauma is the normalization of horror. In *The Corpse Washer*, violence becomes a routine part of daily life. Jawad's family accepts war as an expected guest, focusing on survival. His father fatalistically states, "If God wants to end our lives where else would we go?" (Antoon, 2013, p. 61). Traumatized people often become resigned to their circumstances (Herman, 1992, p. 49). The ceaseless trauma in Iraq causes a passive surrender to brutality.

Mundane details like dinner take on dark overtones for Jawad: "I watched Father's fingers cut the bread and put food in his mouth" (Antoon, 2013, p. 22). Victims can experience ordinary life as contaminated by trauma. Psychic numbing results from repetitive horror. Jawad describes his work washing the endless piles of corpses as if it were an everyday desk job, waiting for "the Angel of Death" to get "a promotion, perhaps to become a god" (Antoon, 2013, p. 131). By depicting such surreal horror in banal terms, Antoon suggests trauma fundamentally alters one's perception of reality.

### Cyclical Violence Across Generations





The Corpse Washer emphasizes how trauma is transmitted across generations. Jawad's family has been washing corpses for centuries through the violence of colonialism, monarchy, and dictatorship. His father longs for the "timid" death of the past compared to the overwhelming carnage Jawad now faces (Antoon, 2013, p. 3). Each generation relives the suffering imprinted in familial and national memory.

Intergenerational haunting is embodied in the ghostly old man who commands Jawad to "write down all the names!" of the dead (Antoon, 2013, p. 26). As Vickroy (2002) notes, "visitations from the dead frequently stand for the haunting power of historical wounds" (p. 158). The chain of traumas from Iraq's history possesses Jawad. Antoon suggests society remains trapped in repetition compulsions until these ghosts are confronted.

American occupation reignites sectarian conflicts suppressed under Saddam, continuing the cycle: "The student is gone and the teacher is here" (Antoon, 2013, p. 72). Kaplan (2005) argues cultural narratives shape trauma's impact (p. 1). Jawad and his family lack frameworks to process cumulative losses as Iraq lurches between dictatorships. Political oppression intertwines with personal trauma. Antoon implies confronting historical trauma is needed to break free of its violent repetition.

### Literature as Empathetic Witness

While pain resists language, Antoon suggests writing can compassionately bear witness to unspeakable suffering. Caruth (1996) argues narrative attempts to convey realities “not otherwise available” in trauma (p. 4). Art protests the muteness of horror and isolation. Antoon’s vivid imagery gives emotive shape to war’s devastation, from the “black rain” of oil fires to Baghdad as a stabbed heart (2013, p. 33). While no words fully explain, literature cultivates empathy.

Jawad attempts to testify to the trauma of washing Iraq’s dead through poetic fragments. Even unfinished, his chronicle resists collective amnesia. Antoon’s fiction also serves as a secret history of war’s psychic wounds. As Vickroy (2002) notes, formally fractured trauma narratives mirror its cognitive effects: "primer for experiencing trauma's impacts" (p. 166). Through characters like Jawad, Antoon invites readers as witnesses to profound human suffering and resilience.

### Collective Trauma of War and Occupation

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon depicts both the collective and personal traumas inflicted by dictatorship, war, and occupation. On a national level, Iraqis hoped toppling Saddam would bring liberation. However, the American invasion only intensified suffering according to Antoon’s perspective. He illustrates the view that Iraqis remain trapped in an endless cycle of oppression.

After the fall of Saddam’s regime, Iraq plunges into sectarian chaos rather than achieving democracy. One character states bitterly, “The student is gone and the teacher is here” (Antoon, 2013, p. 72), equating American





“liberators” with dictatorial oppressors. Violence and uncertainty continue unabated. Antoon implies the helplessness of watching one nightmare regime replaced by another. No space emerges for healing from past national traumas when new wounds open.

According to Herman (1992), trauma arises from “series of repeated injuries” rather than isolated events, leading to a state of captivity and disconnection from society (p. 87). The US occupation fails to restore social bonds shattered under Saddam. Antoon suggests the cumulative effects of dictatorship, sanctions, invasion, and civil war traumatize Iraqi society. The national psyche remains imprisoned in fear and chaos.

Through Jawad’s corpse washing, Antoon provides a metaphor for Iraq’s endless bloodshed destroying families, communities, and infrastructure. Jawad laments the “bottomless pit” of violence devouring Iraq’s future (2013, p. 184). When institutions collapse, collective grief becomes overwhelming. Antoon implies no healing can occur until Iraq’s origins as a traumatic construct imposed by colonial powers is recognized.

### **Witnessing Horrors of War**

Jawad serves as a voice testifying to war’s unspeakable cruelty. His duties force intimate contact with mutilated bodies rendered nameless: “faces laced with wrinkles as if they were hundreds of years old” (Antoon, 2013, p. 26). Jawad records his experiences washing the war dead in poetic fragments, attempting to salvage meaning from the meaningless slaughter.

According to Caruth (1996), trauma narratives require empathetic witnesses to comprehend the “crisis of truth” they obliquely convey (p. 10). Jawad’s writings protest the erasure of the dead and preserve their stories. While no words can fully explain atrocity, Antoon suggests writing redeems humanity by reconnecting survivors through compassion.

Vickroy (2002) notes engaging with trauma texts can create "emotional, empathetic understanding" (p. xvi). Jawad serves as the reader's guide into war's horrific underworld. By making Jawad's suffering tangible, Antoon moves beyond statistics to depict trauma's intimate human costs. Even unfinished, Jawad's chronicle calls readers to moral witness. Through such works, Antoon demands the international community recognize victims typically rendered invisible.

### **Intergenerational Haunting**

The main source of Jawad’s trauma is his inherited role washing generations of Iraq’s dead. Antoon depicts the corpse washing tradition passed down through Jawad's family as symbolizing the nation’s repressed grief haunting the present. Jawad describes ghosts of the past, like his father and uncle Sabri, rematerializing: “It seemed to me that I was seeing him and talking to him as I did when I was a child” (2013, p. 96).

According to Vickroy (2002), haunting spirits in trauma texts "personify historical atrocities" (p. 15). Jawad cannot escape reliving his father’s pain, as Iraq cannot avoid repeating its bloody history. His dreams of the





terrifying faces of the dead fuse past and present. Antoon suggests only by confronting historical trauma can its possession of the future be exorcised.

The figures Jawad washes represent all Iraq's diverse communities destroyed by colonialism and sectarianism, from "Indians, British, Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Jews" (Antoon, 2013, p. 167). His private agony embodies larger cultural wounds. Antoon mourns rich multicultural legacies suppressed by ideologies of violence. By bearing witness to intergenerational suffering, Jawad's story protests the erasure of the past in collective memory. His ritual role serves as what Kaplan (2005) calls "vicarious trauma" cultivating empathy through imagination (p. 39).

### Literary Trauma Aesthetics

Antoon employs postmodern literary techniques to formally recreate traumatic experience. The Corpse Washer uses cyclical time, repetitive motifs, and fragmented structure to convey lived trauma. As Vickroy (2002) notes, this "literature of trauma" mimics its disruption of cognition (p. xiv). Jawad's fractured narrative denies closure or resolution, paralleling the rupture of selfhood caused by his repetitive exposure to the ruptured bodies of the dead.

According to Whitehead (2004), trauma fiction uses "complicated, confusing, context-dependent strategies" mirroring trauma's effects, demanding reader participation (p. 3). Flashes between past and present, dreams and waking life reflect Jawad's shattered subjectivity. Antoon's



innovative poetics immerse the reader in the nightmarish space between life and death Jawad inhabits. We experience his disorientation and recurring ghosts.

By stylistically embodying trauma's effects, Antoon creates empathy for atrocities resisting comprehension. Caruth (1996) argues that art can convey traumatic truths "not otherwise available" through realistic representation (p. 4). The Corpse Washer's modernist form hauntingly conjures the sensory and cognitive impact of violence. Antoon's surreal imagery provides a visceral portal into war's terrorism of the psyche. Confronting literary trauma can teach crucial lessons about inhumanity and healing.

### Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how Sinan Antoon's novel The Corpse Washer depicts the traumatic impact of violence and war on both individual psychology and collective society in Iraq. Through the story of Jawad and his duty washing dead bodies, Antoon provides a vivid window into the horrors of war invasion, occupation, sectarianism, and dictatorship that have marked Iraq's recent history. He bears empathetic witness to atrocities and their lasting scars in order to protest the cycles of trauma plaguing Iraq across generations.

A key theme examined is how Antoon portrays the profound effects of trauma on identity, relationships, and one's sense of reality through the example of Jawad. His repetitive exposure to gruesome death leaves him psychologically numb, alienated from the living, haunted by surreal dreams, and trapped in the perpetual present of violence. Antoon suggests individual healing is blocked when traumatic events continue unabated.





Without security and stability, Jawad remains frozen in trauma time, unable to integrate his experiences into a coherent life narrative.

Antoon also illustrates through the microcosm of Jawad's family the collective trauma haunting Iraqi society. The rupture of war ripples through generations, as past losses are relived in the present. His novel mourns rich multicultural legacies suppressed by colonization and sectarian ideologies. The trauma of occupation, invasion and civil war has shattered Iraq's social fabric, leaving citizens abandoned without communal spaces to grieve. Antoon implies confronting historical wounds is necessary to free society from its violent repetition compulsion.

By bearing empathetic witness to unspeakable suffering, Antoon's literary testimony makes the ravages of war tangible. His innovative poetics force the reader to confront trauma's terror. Through fragmented form and surreal imagery, he recreates war's cognitive impacts. Antoon resists dehumanization by giving voice to the voiceless victims typically forgotten. While evoking Iraq's haunted history, his novel also dreams of rebuilding identity from fragments. By speaking truth to power, Antoon protests the global community's indifference to human devastation in the name of liberation. His stark visions convey primal human truths about the sanctity of life.

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