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Traces of Woundedness and Ruination in Postwar Iraqi Fiction: Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* as a Case Study

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Literature and Civilisation

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Dedication

… To all the people whom I deeply love …

Dahbia BOUZENNADA

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the soul of my sister Ahlem

and the soul of my nephew Ahmed Yacine

Maroua TOUAHRIA

Abstract

This dissertation examines the traces of war in postwar Iraqi fiction, focusing on Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2014). Through a close reading of the narrative, it explores how wounds and ruins manifest in Antoon's work. By adopting a two-dimensional approach, this study integrates late trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, which delves into the role of narrative in speaking the wounds, alongside Maurice Blanchot's philosophical reflections on "the fragmentary," and the essence of the disaster. Additionally, it employs a contextual and philosophical framework to understand the significance of ruins within the novel, examining how physical and metaphorical ruins reflect the devastation of war. Drawing on the pre-modern tradition of *standing before the ruins.* The research aims to shed light on how Antoon's narrative bears witness to the enduring scars and fragmented realities of his homeland, and how wounds and ruins are made to speak. It also seeks to render significance to contemporary Arab fiction by giving it value and placing it within the broader context of world literature. This is particularly relevant given the increasing translations and growing readership of recent Arab literary works. Ultimately, the dissertation contributes to the understanding of how modern Arab writers engage aesthetically, ethically, and politically with contemporary issues.

Keywords: War Fiction, Postwar Iraqi Fiction, Sinan Antoon, Wound, Narrative, Ruins, Ruination, Writing the Disaster, Cathy Caruth, Maurice Blanchot.

Résumé

Cette thèse examine les traces de la guerre dans la fiction irakienne d'après-guerre, en se concentrant sur le roman de Sinan Antoon *Seul Le Grenadier* (2014). À travers une lecture attentive de la narration, elle explore comment les blessures et les ruines se manifestent dans l'œuvre d'Antoon. En adoptant une approche à deux dimensions, cette étude intègre la théorie du traumatisme de Cathy Caruth, qui examine le rôle de la narration dans l'expression des blessures, et les réflexions philosophiques de Maurice Blanchot sur le langage, la narration et la représentation. De plus, elle utilise un cadre contextuel et philosophique pour comprendre la signification des ruines dans le roman, en examinant comment les ruines physiques et métaphoriques reflètent la dévastation de la guerre. La recherche vise à mettre en lumière comment la narration d'Antoon témoigne des cicatrices durables et des réalités fragmentées de sa patrie. Elle cherche également à donner de l'importance à la fiction arabe contemporaine en lui accordant de la valeur et en la plaçant dans le contexte plus large de la littérature mondiale. Ceci est particulièrement pertinent compte tenu de l'augmentation des traductions et du nombre croissant de lecteurs d'œuvres littéraires arabes récentes. En fin de compte, cette thèse contribue à la compréhension de la manière dont les écrivains arabes modernes s'engagent esthétiquement, éthiquement et politiquement avec les enjeux contemporains.

Mots clés : Fiction de guerre, Fiction Irakienne, Sinan Antoon, Blessure, Narration, Ruines, Ruination, L'Écriture du Désastre, Cathy Caruth, Maurice Blanchot.

الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث آثار الحرب في الأدب العراقي بعد الحرب، مع التركيز على رواية "وحدها شجرة الرمان" لسنان أنطون (2014). من خلال قراءة معمقة للسرد، يستكشف هذا البحث تجليات الجروح والخراب في عمل أنطون. باتباع منهج ذي بعدين، تدمج هذه الدراسة نظرية الصدمة لكاثي كاروث، التي تتناول دور السرد في التعبير عن الجروح، وتأملات موريس بلانشو الفلسفية حول اللغة والسرد والتمثل. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تستند الدراسة إلى إطار فلسفي و سياقي لفهم أهمية الخراب داخل الرواية، وفحص الكيفية التي تعكس بها الأطلال المادية والمجازية الدمار الذي خلفته الحرب. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على نمط سرد أنطون لواقع وطنه. كما تسعى إلى إعطاء أهمية للأدب العربي المعاصر من خلال منحه قيمة ووضعه في سياق الأدب العالمي. يكتسي هذا التوجه أهمية خاصة بالنظر إلى زيادة الترجمات وازدياد قراء الأدب العربي الحديث. في النهاية، تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم كيفية تفاعل الكتاب العرب المعاصرين جماليًا وأخلاقيًا وسياسيًا مع القضايا المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : أدب الحروب، ادب عراقي، سنان أنطون، جرح، سرد، أطلال، كتابة الفاجعة، كاثي كاروث، موريس بلانشو.

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Introduction

In the extensive amounts of literary war narratives, the Western narrative has often claimed a central position. Writers have widely documented and fictionalized the tragic events of the twentieth century; Two World Wars, the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, and the 9/11 events. Moreover, numerous scholars widely engaged in analyses and studies about the traumatic experiences of such events. Meanwhile, the traumatic events and the prolonged years of war in the Arab world and the literary landscape born out of the crucible of death and ruination, remained, in many respects, in the shadows. These narratives, however, are often pushed to the periphery of the broader literary scene, overshadowed by more widely recognized Western counterparts.

As a matter of fact, there is a considerable corpus of western literary works that depict the issues and wars of the Middle East. However, most of them are biographies or autobiographies that document the personal experiences of veterans, journalists or photographers, and their narratives are no more than a narrow and/or prejudiced account of the Arab world. One can name some outstanding examples: Kevin Power's *The Yellow Birds* (2012), which is a first-hand military experience; Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014); and Pat Barker's *Double Vision* (2003). However, in the last years, more and more literary accounts have come to challenge western master narratives that have celebrated war and legitimized it. These Arab narratives endeavour to bear witness, expose the harsh realities of the Arab world in the last decades and give voice to the unacknowledged experiences of the overlooked minorities.

In the last few decades, the land of two rivers, Iraq, has become a site of death and rubble. The wars with neighbour countries, the US invasion and the growth of sectarian

conflicts and extremist groups, and more than three decades of violence and oppression trapped Iraqis into an endless cycle of suffering. Many authors escaped the repression and censorship seeking to freely speak the unspeakable. In their exile, the only way to reunite with their homeland is through writing the unhealed wounds and that of their homeland. Sinan Antoon, "the wounded storyteller," is an exiled Baghdad-born Christian poet, writer and New York-based professor. Being a committed writer, Antoon dedicated his words to speak and give voice to the wounds and tragedies of his country. His novels, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2007), *The Corpse Washer* (2014), *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017), and *Fihris (The Book of Collateral Damage* 2018), address the physical and psychological repercussions of the prolonged years of war and oppression Iraq has witnessed.

The Corpse Washer situates itself at two important phases in the modern history: the gulf war 1990 and the US invasion 2003. The novel follows Jawad, the central character in war-torn Baghdad, a young man aspiring to be a sculptor as a way to rebel against his family's tradition of corpse washing. However, circumstances do not favor him, and his cruel fate forces him to become, indeed, a corpse washer. The narrative portrays his life as a constant interaction with corpses, giving the sense that besides Jawad, death itself has a spectral presence. The narrative unfolds in a sequence of surreal nightmares, told in a fragmented fashion, with no clear beginning or ending.

The present dissertation, therefore, directs the attention to a primal example of postwar Iraqi fiction, with a specific focus on Antoon's seminal work *The Corpse Washer* as a case study, a compelling contemporary narrative that grapples with the profound war-traces which left deep wounds and handed Baghdad over to death and ruins. The aim of our dissertation is to delve into an alternative perspective of the bloody history of Iraq, specifically tracing the wounds of a nation as narrated through Antoon's central character.

Previous scholarship on the novel has predominantly focused on sociopolitical and historical analyses, with much focus on the depiction of the aspects of war and the inflicted violence and oppression as a central thematic concern. Sayed M. Ismail Mousa argues that Iraq's current tragedy was "driven by several causes such as social injustice, the oppression of minorities, political despotism, and the persecution of religious minorities, the displacement of Iraqis from the homeland, and the genocidal policies of jihadist" (163). Moreover, in the light of his significant analysis of the Post-2003 Iraqi cultural production, Haytham Bahoora believes that the late Iraqi literary trend is an intervention to speak the unspeakable and the deliberately silenced historical narratives, he writes:

> For contemporary Iraqi writers and artists, whether still in Iraq or forced into exile, the violent post-2003 national landscape is a constitutive thematic concern of their artistic production. The centrality of dismembering violence to the narration of post-2003 Iraqi identity raises a series of questions about the role narrative fiction plays in constructing a history and experience of structural violence for which there has been no political, legal, or historical accountability. Absent this accountability, post-2003 Iraqi literary narratives intervene to articulate the unspeakable, lost, repressed, or deliberately silenced historical narratives of victims of this structural violence. (188)

One can notice that the context in which the novel was written has attracted much attention, while limited focus has been given to the narrative itself and the ways in which it embodies and contains the war-traces. For that reason, this dissertation seeks to address this gap by demonstrating how Antoon's narrative gives form to the unfathomable – those aspects of war that are beyond full comprehension or articulation; it will center around Antoon's preoccupation in portraying and tracing the wounds of his homeland through a detailed analysis of the novel's aesthetic and thematic aspects.

To best achieve this attempt, the research will depend on late trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, a key figure in the field of literary trauma studies. Caruth's seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) revolves around the role of narrative in speaking the wound, suggesting that the wound carries a truth that is otherwise unavailable. In so doing, we aim to demonstrate the ways in which this truth manifests itself through narrative. Stemming from this point, this study will draw on the philosophical reflections of Maurice Blanchot on "the fragmentary," as articulated in his book *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), to bring a much-needed philosophical dimension to our exploration. More specifically, Blanchot's reflections on the ineffable nature of disaster and the challenges of representing extreme experiences in language will further enrich our understanding of the ways in which literature grapples with the unspeakable and the unrepresentable, the ways it embodies and gives shape and form to the ineffable. Additionally, by incorporating these frameworks, the dissertation will attend to the ethical dimensions of representation. It will explore how aesthetics can enable ethics. By attending to the interplay between wound, word (or narrative), and truth (or experience), this study will shed light on how Antoon's narrative engages with the ethical dimensions of representation.

Moreover, this study will address a major significant gap overlooked by most previous readings of the novel, which is the ruination of the land. The novel provides a two-dimensional manifestation of war-traces, the first through the wound trace, the second through the ruin trace. Hence, this part of the research will investigate how ruins manifest themselves in the novel paying close attention to the different open-ended "significations" they hold. Drawing on the pre-modern tradition of *standing before the ruins* or the so called *al wuqūf ʻala al-aṭlāl*, we aim to look at how this ancient motif is reworked and transformed in the contemporary Arabic literary scene as an attempt to come to terms with the mass ruination left in the wake of wars.

In essence, this research will bring together a two-dimensional focus to the exploration of war-traces: wounds and ruins. Central to this analysis is the concept of the "trace," which serves as a common thread to our reading of the novel; both wounds and ruins leave traces. This layered approach highlights how both wounds and ruins serve as enduring markers of war. By examining the interplay of woundedness and ruination, the study reveals the profound ways in which war imprints itself, leaving fractured selves and spaces.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first provides a contextual and theoretical framework. It will delineate essential reflections on trauma theory, with specific focus on the interplay between wounds and words. Moreover, it will draw connections between Maurice Blanchot's reflections on "the fragmentary," and the ways in which literature grapples with the unrepresentable. Lastly, it will provide essential reflections on ruins as a conceptual framework. These reflections are crucial in justifying the relevance of employing the framework of ruins to interpret and understand the novel's thematic and narrative elements.

The second chapter is dedicated to the first analytical part of our study. Initially, it explores the thematic layers embedded within the narrative, dissecting the overarching themes and their implications within the novel. Subsequently, the focus narrows down to the narrative, examining the ways in which Antoon uses fragmented narrative coupled with poetic language and surreal imagery to portray the nightmarish life of his protagonist. Moreover, the chapter will delve into the significance of the nightmare sequences and the grotesque elements, as an attempt to unravel their symbolic meanings and connotations. In essence, the chapter will examine the ways in which the unspeakable manifests itself within the narrative.

In the final chapter, the dissertation turns into the manifestation of ruination within the novel, utilizing the framework of ruins as a conceptual lens. Through this analytical lens, the chapter meticulously examines the various facets of ruination present in the narrative

landscape. It explores the open-ended significance of ruins, highlighting their multifaceted meanings and symbolic resonances within the context of the novel.

The general significance of this dissertation lies in placing contemporary Arab fiction within the broader context of world literature, particularly in light of recent developments in the field. By examining how writers engage ethically, aesthetically, and politically with contemporary issues, this study seeks to highlight their role in bearing witness to stories that have often been overlooked and have rarely been taken into account by history. Through this multifaceted approach, the significance of this research lies in its ability to uncover and acknowledge these unrecognized narratives, enriching our understanding of contemporary Arab fiction.

However, this research is not without limitations. Restricted by space, time, and lack of access to certain sources. Future studies could widen the scope by including additional works and perspectives.

Chapter One:

Theoretical and Contextual Framework

This chapter provides a contextual and theoretical framework, setting the essential basis of our framework. First, it will provide a brief historical overview on war writing in general, and postwar Iraqi fiction in specific. Then, it will delineate a comprehensive overview on trauma theory, with a focus on the role of language (or narrative) and the interplay between wound, truth, and representation. Moreover, it will incorporate Maurice Blanchot's reflections on the unbridgeable gap between language and experience, and the essence of disaster, which are essential to our reading of the novel in the second chapter. Lastly, it will offer essential reflections on the poetics of space, both in philosophy and the classical Arabic tradition, which are of paramount relevance to our reading of the novel through the lens of ruins.

1. War Writing

1.1 Historical Background: Mapping War Literature

From the echoes of antiquity till the contemporary era, human history has been marked by the chronic repetition of warfare, albeit manifested in different forms yet similar in its essence. Since war reverberates through literature, the omnipresence of war literature is undeniable, as it has extended beyond the confines of specific national borders and evolved to manifest itself in different forms through different ages.

Historically, war writing has existed since the ancient depiction of Mesopotamian battlefields, exemplified in the ancient Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*. Tracing its transitions through different epochs, it emerged as a fundamental narrative in Greek and Roman epics

and victory stories, such as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* (8 BC) as well as Virgil's *Aeneid* (19BC). The early war writings including these epic texts and poetry as well as other classical sagas were produced mainly to celebrate the victories and strength of their respective culture and to document the most prominent historical events and mythologies in order to enable it to cross cultural boundaries and transit through different eras and areas. In early classical war writings, heroism was the most celebrated theme, because it served as the main element that highlighted other themes such as nobility, duty, loyalty, fate and destiny, in addition to the vivid description of the battlefields.

World War I and II, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and the so-called "War on Terror" were pivotal global episodes that shaped modern human history. These events attracted a great focus by early war studies and were extensively interpreted using different approaches and including different genres such as fiction, diaries, and journals.

Early scholarship was mostly focused on white male soldiers and their experiences in war battlefields, being a direct and reliable witness of the event whom Samuel Hynes, in his seminal study *The Soldiers Tale* (1997), describes as "the man who was there" (xii). War writing, gradually changing and evolving to be more prominent and influential in its contemporary context, has become more inclusive, encompassing gender and ethnic minorities. Thus, a new lens through which new holistic perspectives on war experiences are produced in order to document the complexity of war experiences and its psychological repercussions on both individual and collective consciousness, beyond the superficial description of the war itself and the hideous experiences and injuries of soldiers themselves, as in Sebastian Folk's *Birds Song* (1993) and Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928).

Remarkably, Middle Eastern and North African conflicts, such as The Lebanese Civil War, the Palestinian Issue, The Arab Spring, The Algerian War of Independence, the Iraq

War, in addition to Liberation movements, became a source of inspiration for many authors and poets who decided to dedicate their words to communicate and acknowledge the agonizing repercussions of war and the wounds it inflicted in the memory and psyche of individuals – wounds that are beyond the physical damage, unhealed wounds.

War writing as a genre typically depicts a specific historical conflict or provides a profound description of the experiences of soldiers or civilians within a war context. It employs heavy emotional language, along with fragmented narrative, which is more prominent in modern war writing and has become a trend in contemporary war literature, in order to convey the chaotic and complex nature of war and to allow readers to connect and get immersed in the aesthetic literary experience.

1.2 Mediating War Narratives

> "As long as there has been war, there have been writers trying to understand it, turning battlefield horrors into narrative, trying to make something useful out of its debris" (Woodward)

Narrative is "an overarching storyline that ties events together in a seamless explanatory framework" (Ochs and Capps). It may be used as catharsis, to narrate and document historical events, to ease emotional distress and foster collective empathy. "The narrative of large-scale human conflicts and war have been set dawn, recorded and narrated for thousands of years, from Thucydides to Tolstoy, in fiction, nonfiction, museums and in the private spheres of the family" (Adler et al 28).

War writing is indeed a very large genre that spans back to ancient ages and depicts heroic events up to our modern wars and conflicts, as well as their traumatic impacts. This is because "the war is still too much a part of life to be accepted as a field of literature" (qtd in J.D Passos 75). It includes various narratives and perspectives to ensure these events remain engraved in our memories.

Accordingly, other examples of literary works that touch upon the experiences of war include Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which tells the story of Henry Fleming, a young soldier and his journey from frustration, fear and self-doubt to courage and bravery in the midst of the chaos and havoc of the American civil war, as well as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1867), which gave new perspectives to war writing: the individual versus the brutality of war. Another prominent example is Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, a book that dramatizes (if not romanticizes) the author's youthful experience during World War I" (Woodward).

We can also mention Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), "the Vietnam War novel that [...] has inspired some of the best-known works in the American canon" (Woodward). This novel depicts the brutality of war and the burdens carried by the soldiers. It deals with the traumatic aspects of war experienced by humans during conflict time and its long-term repercussions. Moreover, war and trauma are adequately addressed in the fictional work of Kurt Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), which provides a unique storytelling to real-life events within the timeline of WWII through the imaginative and creative interpretation of the author.

Maus (1986), a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman, "the most affecting and successful narrative ever done about the Holocaust" (Wall Street Journal), is considered a memoir, an autobiography or a fictional history novel that depicts the horrific experiences of Spiegelman's father during the Holocaust, portraying the characters as anthropomorphic animals; Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. It highlights the psychological trauma caused by the Holocaust and offers a great interpretation of modern Jewish history and of Germany during the WWII. Another prime example is Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), which shared with the world the horrific genocide that was committed by the Nazis led by Adolf

Hitler; it is what the US Holocaust Museum and Memorial calls as “the first, and sometimes only, exposure many people have to the history of the Holocaust” (US Holocaust Museum).

Notably, the 9/11 attacks sparked social debate and public engagement due to its impact on American national security. Thus, it generated a sense of fear and insecurity within the society. However, it went beyond its impact on national safety and became an intriguing episode in human history that attracted many writers to engage with and reflect upon its impact on the representation and reception of different religions, cultures and minorities. Don Delillo’s *The Falling Man* (2007) is a fictional novel that concerns a survivor of the 9/11 attacks and how this event has prolonged effects on his life, through the fragmented and oblique vignettes, which are hard to grab onto, it reflects the rapidity of what happened and the amount of shock and frustration it left. On the other hand, Jonathan Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Clear* (2005), with its evocative and melancholic language, fosters sympathy with the protagonist Oskar Schell, who lost his father in the attacks. It creates a tragically resonant exploration of themes of loss and trauma and its effects on the psyche and on human connections.

The conflicts and civil wars of the Middle East are significant milestones in the history of warfare, because they have not only shaped the geopolitical landscape of the region but the way history, past and future are perceived. Wars always remain “unfinished business” (Bronfen 5); the imprints of wars never vanish. They always remain: memories also linger, along with stories, casting a shadow through the memories and stories that persist long after the conflicts end. Arguably, the traumas and memories of wartime continue to haunt the narratives emerging from the Arab world and the Middle East, bearing witness to the shared traumatic past and reshaping the contemporary landscape of the region. These narratives are one way of preserving and resurrecting memories and stories from the risk of fading into the abyss of historical amnesia.

In his study *The Lost Memory*, the Lebanese novelist and critic Elias Khoury argues that "war was the experience of losing or eradicating memory, rather than preserving or maintaining memory and remembrance" (Mostafa 215). Hence, he was among the pioneers advocating for writing fiction that intended to eradicate amnesia and reconstruct history and memory from the debris of fragmentation, filling this void with literature that authentically mirrors the fractured reality, however shattered and broken this mirror might be, and gives meaning to what would otherwise be deemed as meaningless carnage.

Indeed, the war experience has defined the region and shaped its people's narratives and the way they wrote literature. Khoury is a committed writer, and his work has become part of a heritage among Arab writers. His second novel *Gate of the Sun* (1998), and perhaps his most read work, puts into question the relationship between these traumatic experiences in relation to their long-lasting memories, and their effect on one's sense of self amidst chaos and ruins.

In this respect, one must also mention Mahmoud Darwish's masterpiece *Memory for Forgetfulness* (2013), where he writes: "I want a language that I can lean on and that can lean on me, that asks me to bear witness and that I can ask to bear witness" (30). In his introduction to Darwish's text, Ibrahim Muhawi beautifully asserts that "in the midst of the overwhelming actuality of death, Darwish sets down, in his poetic prose, moments of authentic existence" (20); in other words, Darwish's poetic language elevates the ordinary into something profound, where ordinary moments of everyday life such as making coffee becomes a ritual of survival and turns to a heroic act. These "moments of authentic existence" are encapsulated in the following lines, which are worth quoting at length:

> What if this inferno were to take a five-minute break, and then come what may? Just five minutes! I almost say, "Five minutes only, during which I could make my one and only preparation and then ready myself for life or death."

…

> How can I diffuse the aroma of coffee into my cells, while shells from the sea rain down on the sea-facing kitchen, spreading the stink of gunpowder and the taste of nothingness? I measure the period between two shells. One second. One second: shorter than the time between breathing in and breathing out, between two heartbeats. One second is not long enough for me to stand before the stove by the glass facade that overlooks the sea. One second is not long enough to open the water bottle or pour the water into the coffee pot. One second is not long enough to light a match. But one second is long enough for me to burn. (43,44)

Correspondingly, the Algerian revolutionary war exceeded its national confines and received cosmopolitan engagement and interest. In a similar manner, the Iraq war and other Middle East civil wars attracted a transnational attention. While they were not as extensively explored as WWI and II, their traumatic experiences and narratives were acknowledged and highly appreciated by many writers. War and trauma narratives unfold in the pages of many authors who were able to verbalize the wounds of the war and skilfully capture the complexity of both individual and collective traumatic experiences, infuse it into their writings and integrate it into narratives that became celebrated and acknowledged. A prime example is *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014) by Hassan Blasim, which depicts the gruesome and bloody Iraq under war, controlled by inescapable violence and horrifying death. This work provides new perspectives on war from those who were invaded and killed, unlike O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), which is a depiction of the American soldier in the battlefields.

These diverse narratives from the World War I and the veteran memory to contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts, serve as testimony of human resilience against the traumatic and devastating repercussions of war. They call for reflections and better

understanding of war and its human aftermath by providing nuanced perspectives and viewpoints.

1.3. Narrating War: Between Wounds and Words

Global wars and civil wars shaped the individual life of soldiers, civilians and of communities through the injection of pain, death, loss and suffering into their daily life. The prolonged trauma that came alongside the prolonged years of wars and violence gave birth to the concept of "War Trauma," which was defined by Sarah Fielding as "blanket statement covering any traumatic event experienced while preparing for, living through, or serving in a war" (Fielding). This highlights the fact that it is not only the soldiers who witness atrocities in combat zones and are the only victims; civilians are also subjected to loss, violence, forced displacement, fear and lack of safety as well as physical and psychological damage.

Literature is a tool to communicate, interpret and document universal human experiences. Thus, war literature has been of great efficiency in capturing the complexity and brutality of wars. War literature shifted from the focus on white male soldiers and the documentation of their own personal experiences to the inclusion of other unacknowledged minorities. Authors and scholars have become increasingly concerned with the contributions and challenges of non-western, less represented voices. Moreover, war literature has evolved to encompass trauma studies, memory studies, and cultural studies, in order to reflect broader and more comprehensive examination and understanding of human conditions in the midst of wars and conflicts.

The destructive repercussions of war beyond the physical and geographical damage, are mostly psychological and emotional including PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), prolonged trauma, alienation, displacement, dispersed families and shattered lives. War literature is perfectly concerned with closely examining these themes. It explores how the traumatic experiences affect the individual's emotional stability and his perception and

connection with the external world. It also calls attention to the way trauma shapes and is shaped by language and narrative. Trauma and narrative intersect and influence each other. Trauma produces narratives in order to impart the traumatic experience through language. In this respect, Geoffrey Hartman argues that different narratives enable us to "read the wound" of trauma (Hartman 537), and that trauma perhaps "can only be reclaimed by literary knowledge" (qtd in Caruth 641). These claims are powerful vindications that literature can access trauma, verbalize its wounds and shape its narratives. Shoshana Felman, who has formulated narrative manifestations of trauma, argues that trauma narratives discuss trauma knowledge whether repressed or supressed. Additionally, these narratives provide space for the traumatic experience to be re-created. War literature "describe[s] emotional wounds, traces left on the mind by the catastrophe, painful events. "The psychological injury, lasting damage done to individuals or communities by tragic events or severe distress" (Davis and Meretoja 1); it transforms war experiences into narrative. For there is "a stable and unchanging break between word and world, or between word [or narrative] and wound" (Pederson 100).

The psychological pain is highly demonstrated through the melancholic language, fragmentation, silence and gaps, blurriness, which depict the horrors of wars that have marked human history. Literature depicts war and its traumatic aftermath through various narratives and forms. Thus, literature is an ideal space to represent trauma using emotional language, symbolism, and imagery, for "[t]he traumatic event can only be addressed or acknowledged by a figurative language" (Kurtz 55).

A young soldier under fire in WWI in Charles Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* says: "Insane thoughts race through my brain. I want to catch hold of something, something that will explain this mad fury, this maniacal congealed hatred that pours down on our heads. I can find nothing to console me, nothing to appease my terror" (26,27). This shows "[t]hat literature on war always walks a close line between giving voice to the traumatic suffering of

those affected by it" (Kurtz 217), tracing the scars left by wars. Blasim, in his ultraviolent depiction of Iraqi horrific disaster, *The Corpse Exhibition*, succeeded in conveying trauma within its lines: "We fought for every morsel we ate, weighted down by the sadness and the fears generated by the unknown and the known. […] We had been broken one after the other like discarded mannequins. […] Hatred had crushed our childish fingers, crashed our bones" (125,126). *The Corpse Exhibition* shows, through the disturbing, provocative and unsettling language, how Iraqis were living in hell. Witnessing relentless torture, murder and genocide, which Iraq survived during Saddam Hussein's rule. The vivid description of the prolonged years of wars and its lasting scars, thus make war literature a manifestation, par excellence, of trauma and human suffering.

2. Postwar Iraqi Literature

2.1. Historical Context

The recent history of Iraq is marked by sharp turns, horrific events, and profound transformations that have shaped the trajectory of the nation, during a relatively short period of time. Emerging from the colonial legacy of the early twentieth century, Iraq underwent a series of shifts throughout the latter half of the century, culminating in decades of turmoil, conflict, and uncertainty. As the world witnessed the ebbs and flows of power dynamics, and "when modern sensibilities were being formed," Iraq stood at the crossroads of history, navigating through turbulent waters of change. Ferial J. Ghazoul in her article "The Unhomely at Home," for instance, describes this experience as a historical nightmare: "The collective Iraqi experience in the second half of the twentieth century – when modern sensibilities were being formed – has been characterized by upheavals, wars, revolutions, violence and sanctions amounting to a historical nightmare and a horror serial" (1), all of which took place mostly under the ruthless Ba'ath Party dictatorship and the reign of Saddam

Hussein, who ruled the country from 1979 until his overthrow after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

While the invasion of Iraq in 2003 stands out as pivotal moment in the nation's recent history, it is crucial to recognize that this event was not an isolated occurrence, but rather the culmination of a series of complex factors and preceding events. In fact, it is Act Three in a larger narrative of Iraq's trajectory in the latter half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.

Under Saddam's rule, Iraq experienced a series of internal and external conflicts that had far-reaching consequences, driven by Saddam's ambitions for territorial and regional dominance and pursuit of power at the cost of his country and its people. The Iraqi people bore the brunt of his brutal decision, dragging his country into an eight-year war with Iran, leaving immense devastation and mass atrocities which left Iraq in ruins, with countless lives lost and a legacy of fear and suffering for the Iraqi people.

Saddam followed the Iraq-Iran war with another one, invading Kuwait in 1991. This triggered an immediate and forceful international condemnation and military intervention by a US-led coalition to force Saddam's troops to retreat. Consequently, Iraq plunged into a new era of chaos and suffering, exacerbated by the imposition of severe sanctions and embargoes by the US, deepening, as a result, the suffering of Iraqis into poverty and famine. Tragically, the toll of this suffering claimed numerous lives, including innocent children.

The turning point came in 2003 when the United States, under President George W. Bush, launched a military invasion of Iraq, under false accusations of possession of weapons of mass destruction and his links to terrorism and the 9/11 attacks. These false claims served as the pretext for the invasion.

The invasion of Iraq may have brought an end to Saddam's dictatorship, but it also unleashed a wave of violence and chaos that continues to plague the country to this day. In his book *Wining the War, Losing the Peace* (2007), Allawi writes,

> When the Coalition arrived in Baghdad on 9 April, 2003, it found a fractured and brutalised society, presided over by a fearful, heavily armed minority … The institutions of the state were moribund; the state exhausted. The ideology that had held Ba'athist rule had decayed beyond repair. None of this was entirely unexpected, but it masked something more profound. These were the surface manifestations of Iraqi, particularly Iraqi Arab, society. But the real dangers – of divisiveness, vengefulness, deeply held grievances and bottled-up ethnic and sectarian passions – lurked underneath. (16)

2.2. The Emergence of Postwar Iraqi Literature

In her poem "The Iraqi Nights," Dunya Mikhail unfurls her verses,

> Five centuries have passed
> Since Scheherazade told her tale.
> Baghdad fell,
> And they forced me to the underworld.
> My shadow,
> imprisoned in Aladdin's lamp,
> …
> In Iraq,
> After a thousand and one nights. (Lines 33-41)

In these haunting words, the echoes of Baghdad's turbulent history resonate, serving as a fitting prelude to the narrative of Postwar Iraqi literature. Just as Scheherazade's tales endured the test of time, so too did Baghdad weather centuries of conquests, upheavals, and

transformations. “In Iraq, after a thousand and one nights,” we stand at the crossroads of a dark chapter in Iraq’s history. Yet amidst the ashes of destruction and shadows of despair, a new literary landscape emerged, one shaped by resilience, creativity, and richness.

Since time immemorial, Iraq, the land of the two rivers, the Mesopotamia of ancient times, has been a land marked by sorrow and tragedy, a narrative that finds its roots in ancient epics such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This epic, one of the earliest surviving works of literature, reflects themes of loss, mortality, and the quest for meaning, setting a tone that resonates through Iraq’s dark history.

In the modern era, Iraq’s story continues to be one of anguish and bloodshed. The nation’s recent past is marked by wars, fragmentation, and loss, leaving behind a “dismembered nation” (Bahoora 1). The bloody history of modern Iraq stands as a testament to the enduring cycle of suffering that has plagued the region for centuries. However, art in its various forms often emerges as a response to or a means of coping with crises. That is to say, artistic expression is intertwined with the human desire to find meaning, beauty, and transcendence even in the face of challenges and difficulties. Art can serve as a way to navigate and transcend the struggles and uncertainties of life. In her article “Literature and the Arts in Contemporary Iraqi Culture”, Ghazoul writes,

> Such creativity does not deny we have lost ground to the forces of disintegration, yet it suggests we have not lost the battle altogether. In the darkness of this existential tunnel, the cultural heroes of our time hold up candles. They neither paper over the ugly reality nor engage in political, ethnic or sectarian polarization. Instead, they offer something noble and moving. These rare cultural gifts should be treasured in these dismal and repetitive scenes of degradation. (234)

As is the case in totalitarian regimes, artists and intellectuals faced censorship and restrictions. Any artistic or literary production that did not serve war propaganda or did not

glorify and praise the Father-Leader was considered unnecessary and, therefore not published (Rohde 188). As a writer, it was vital to vocalize support for the regime, or else risk facing severe consequences.

As a result, many writers and intellectuals had to flee the country to enjoy the bitter freedom of exile. Among those was the highly acclaimed poet Sargon Boulus, "The Master of Exile" as described by Antoon, who sought refuge in the United States, where he continued his literary pursuits away from the land he was forced to leave behind, that now existed only in his memory. In his exile, Boulus encountered the dislocation and the disconnectedness of the displaced person, crafting poetry with a sense of loss and grief, and a profound longing that defined his exilic existence. In one instance, Antoon writes,

> Some will say that [Boulus] lived in the United States for four decades. Yes, but it never became a home/land. Sargon said in an interview:
>
> America for me is a place to live, a home, but not a homeland - you can't have that twice. And at the same time, you cannot go back to your country again . . . The Arabic language, which is the umbilical cord that ties me to my people and my history, is the only true home I have. ("The Master of Exile")

2.2.1. Experimentation in Postwar Iraqi Literature

All wars are infernal. War in Iraq, however, stands as a uniquely fashioned inferno. The land of the two rivers has become an infernal land, where anguish lingers eternally. Just as Dante journeyed through the circles of Hell, so too did the Iraqis embark on a harrowing odyssey. In this modern-day inferno, Iraq has become a haunting reflection of Dante's vision, where the echoes of turmoil and suffering knew no end.

As Iraq continued to endure the relentless turmoil, its suffering found a voice through storytelling and literature. Iraqi writers took it upon themselves to navigate the complexities of war and its trauma, capturing the raw pain and refracting fragmented realities into

collective narratives that bear witness to the death, destruction, and human suffering – which each of these wars have brought with it.

Iraq's tragedy, nevertheless, has served as a catalyst for the emergence of innovative narratives that vividly depict and critically engage with reality. Such reality is portrayed "in such a way that only fiction can achieve, using an aesthetic that problematises and dramatizes the human experiences of the Iraqis in their existential struggle with life and death" (Masmoudi 135). Recent Iraqi writers have embraced experimentation in writing fiction; hence, recent Iraqi fiction, Ghazoul adds,

> [H]as veered towards the fantastic, the surrealist, the Kafkaesque, the labyrinthine, the uncanny, not out of renunciation of the real, but out of verisimilitude. Life in Iraq is depicted in juxtaposed scenes rather than plots. Continuity is privileged over causality […] the confidence in a hopeful future has given way to a consciousness of the absurd and monstrous. (3)

These characteristic features are exhibited in several narratives. Among those, the works of Hassan Blasim, Ahmad Saadawi, and Sinan Antoon stand out for their masterful adaptation of fragmentation as an aesthetic tool. Blasim's collection of short stories such as *The Madman of Freedom Square* (2009) and *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014), intricately weaves together disjointed narratives and perspectives, creating a mosaic of fragmented realities that reflect the chaotic nature of contemporary existence, Similarly, Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2014) employs fragmented storytelling to explore the complexities of morbid life in war-torn Baghdad, where fragmented identities and shattered lives become symbolic of the broader human condition in times of conflict.

Moreover, Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), which received wide critical acclaim, makes use of the Frankenstein trope. The novel is set in post-2003 US invasion' Iraq, where Saadawi reimagines Mary Shelley's canonical monster Frankenstein "to

narrate a bloody landscape in which the past is resurrected to haunt the present" (Bahoora 139) and represent the Iraqi reality with all its cruelty and violence. It stitches a monstrous figure out of body parts from bomb blast victims, haunting the streets of Baghdad and seeking revenge. Saadawi recounts:

> A young man walked into the morgue […], demanding to see the corpse of his brother, who'd just been killed by a bomb. The man in charge at the morgue led the grieving brother to a room filled with assorted limbs, casually pointing to one body part in the corner. The man wailed asking where the rest of his sibling's mutilated body was, to which the desensitized morgue manager said while waving his hand around the rest of the room, "take what you want, and make yourself a body"
>
> And so, in that horrific setting, Frankenstein was born again – two centuries after Mary Shelley's – this time, in Baghdad. (Hankir)

To conclude, through the literary landscape of Iraq, we are reminded of the power of storytelling to illuminate the darkest corners of history. In the midst of Iraq's turmoil, writers and artists serve as cultural heroes; as beautifully put,

> The Iraqi phoenix is bound to be reborn from its ashes. The protagonist of the ancient Iraqi epic, Gilgamesh – the first tragic hero of literature – understood, after a long search, that the dead cannot come back to life, but the good deeds on the walls of Uruk will stay on. May unbound admiration goes to those who continue to write and draw on the walls even though they see the cracks in them. (Ghazoul 235)

2.3. Postwar Iraqi Literature as Testimony

History, for all its grandeur, is also a master of amnesia and selective forgetfulness, pushing certain narratives to the shadows of its hidden corners, where they languish forgotten and obscure. Moreover, this tendency towards amnesia and selective forgetfulness is particularly striking in the context of the Middle East and the Arab world in general. Not to

mention the deliberate dehumanizing western perspectives, which often dominate grand narratives and global consciousness.

Furthermore, in a world saturated by images and amidst the relentless bombardment of media coverage depicting the pain and the suffering of others, the widespread dissemination of these images has reduced human tragedy to a mere spectacle for consumption. Stripped of its human dimension, such coverage renders suffering ordinary and banal, transforming it into just another news item or "a commonplace issue" (Abdullah 110). Still, this does not defy the fact that images and photographs do possess the power to create "the shock effect."

By the same token, Susan Sontag, in her seminal work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), provides meticulous reflections on war photography and on this notion of "shock." She writes, "[shock] is part of the normality of a culture in which [it] has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value" (18). However, in one instance, Virginia Woolf wrote, "those photographs are not argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye" (10). In other words, while photographs may depict reality and provoke a sense of shock, they are inherently limited in their ability to convey deeper meanings, they only capture a moment in time. Furthermore, Sontag further elaborates on the fact that photographs depend solely on their "shock effect," but "[s]hock can become familiar. Shock can wear off" (65).

Who can forget the tragic image of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose lifeless body was carried by the sea to the shore on a beach in Turkey in 2015? This photograph undoubtedly shocked many and brought widespread attention to the Syrian tragedy, which has always been neglected and overlooked. In contrast to photographs, which freezes moments in time, literature has the capacity to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries and give such a tragedy more meaning and life. Moreover, it allows for an aesthetic of pain and pleasure and a cathartic effect that only a narrative can achieve. As

words take shape in time, with each word literature uncovers a life and allows readers to contemplate deep emotions and feelings hidden in every angle of the narrative. As Sontag concludes, “a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel” (95).

In the context of the Middle East and Iraq in specific, these narratives give voice to the voiceless and stand as a testament to their prolonged pain, which has always been neglected and overlooked. Those victims of wars are partakers of culture, and their pain must be commemorated and remembered. Hence, this gap is filled by art and literature, as Masmoudi concludes,

> The world’s relationship to Iraq has been dominated by the West’s own military, political and academic discourses on Iraq; there remains a significant gap in this knowledge that can be filled by the testimony of Iraqi writers, told in their own voices, and, to date, only in their own language, offering their own perspectives on the events that have shaped their history and changed their lives. (1)

3. An Overview of Trauma Theory

3.1. Conceptualization of Trauma

Etymologically, the origin of the word “trauma” traces back to its ancient Greek roots which means “to break, cut, hurt, injure, scathe, sear or (most commonly) to wound” (qtd in Boukhalfa 3). In other words, the term “trauma” initially denoted physical “wound.” However, it was not until the late 19th century, thanks to Sigmund Freud, that trauma came to encompass “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3).

Moreover, Freud suggested that “the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event,” but rather an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be

fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors" (Caruth 3). Accordingly, Freud introduced his classical idea of belatedness and latency, which entails that trauma resists immediate comprehension. Freud's concept further highlights the temporal gap between the occurrence of trauma and its eventual emergence in the form of a repetitive cycle, which manifests itself again and again in dreams and nightmares.

3.1.1. Trauma as "A Travelling Concept": Trauma in Literary Studies

The growing interest in trauma and trauma theory corresponded with the disastrous events that characterized the twentieth century, such as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the 9/11 attacks, in addition to the wars of decolonization. In response to these events, scholars and academics further generated discussions on understanding the nature of trauma and its repercussions. This interest extended beyond the narrow conceptualization of trauma solely as post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD).

Arguably, these discussions paved the way to encompass a more mature approach to understanding and representing trauma, one that expended beyond psychoanalysis to intersect with broader disciplines such as cultural studies, philosophy, literature and other artistic forms including world cinema. Indeed, some of the most affecting portrayals of war trauma in world cinema, such as *The Ascent* (1977), *Come and See* (1985), and *The Pianist* (2002), vividly capture the devastating repercussions of conflict and its aftermath on the individual and collective psyches.

Similarly, the trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, wrote extensively about trauma from a literary standpoint. In her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), her focus uniquely revolves around the intersection of literature and trauma. She elucidates how literature serves as a site of trauma, where trauma is both represented and explored. That is to say, literature becomes not just a medium for storytelling, but a deeply

resonant space where the complexities of trauma are intricately woven into narrative that attempts to grapple with the enigmatic nature of trauma.

Central to Caruth's argument is that "the language of trauma is literary because it defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (5). Moreover, in her reinterpretation of Freud's writing about trauma, she contends that it is not simply "the wound of the mind," but rather the voice of the wound that cries out, and "what the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us" (4). She argues,

> [I]t is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

In other words, Caruth's understanding of trauma emphasizes its complex nature, emerging as a "crisis of truth," which disrupts traditional notions of truth and comprehension and defies easy immediate understanding. Essentially, this disruption stems from the disjointed nature of trauma; it is not experienced or grasped in a linear fashion. Instead, it manifests belatedly, resurfacing in a fragmented fashion. Hence, it requires an aesthetic of representation that challenges conventional linearity, as temporal borders collapse, making it challenging to construct a coherent linear narrative. It is in these paradoxes that the essence of trauma is best captured. Which is why literature is an ideal embodiment of wounds and words.

3.1.2. Writing the Disaster

"The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact, … [*t*]*he disaster takes care of everything*"

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* [emphasis in the original]

Expanding upon the preceding examination of trauma as an extreme experience that eludes traditional modes of representation due to its enigmatic nature, which undermines

conventional notions of truth and disrupts linear narrative structures, the focus now shifts towards delving into more philosophical insights on the notion of "the fragmentary," as articulated by the highly acclaimed French philosopher Maurice Blanchot in his book *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980).

One central aspect of Blanchot's reflections is the limitations of language in capturing the full depth and complexity of extreme experiences. He suggests that conventional modes of representation often fail to adequately capture the essence of disaster, leading to gaps and silences within the narrative. Correspondingly, this aspect aligns with Caruth's claim, that words often fall short in the face of such experiences, resolving into "gaps and silences, the repeated breakdowns of language, and the collapse of understanding" (qtd in Boukhalfa).

Moreover, unlike ordinary events that can be contained within a narrative arc or temporal framework, disaster transcends such limitations. It disrupts the normal course of events, shattering familiar frameworks and narratives. In this respect, fragmentary writing, within its interruptions and gaps, mirrors this experience of rupture. Blanchot embraces the gaps, silences, and ruptures as integral parts to "the fragmentary." He writes, "the interruption of the incessant: this is the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing: interruption's having somehow the same meaning as that which does not cease" (30). When Blanchot speaks of interruption to have "somehow the same meaning as that which does not cease," he suggests that these interruptions, far from detracting from the meaning, contribute to it by evoking a sense of the unspeakable, the incomprehensible. He further highlights that there remains an unbridgeable gap between language and experience, knowledge and experience, as well as representation and experience.

In essence, Blanchot's reflections challenge the attempts of literature and narrative to impose order and meaning upon an experience that is inherently unstable. His attendance to the fragmentation and interruptions is, in fact, what makes literature significant in trying to

capture the essence of the disaster. He concludes, “when all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (the fragmentary)” (41).

3.2. Crossing Boundaries: Memory and Trauma

3.2.1. The Wounded Memory

The preceding subsection addressed Caruth’s main arguments in relation to trauma theory, its relevance and origins extensively in a comprehensive manner. Building upon this discussion, this subsection will focus on memory, its relationship to trauma and how trauma manifests itself in memory.

Traumatic memories occur when individuals experience harsh and traumatic experiences like wars, natural disasters or violence exposure. When individuals confront such shocking and overwhelming incidents, its repercussions tend to mostly attack the psyche and the mental well-being of those individuals, consequently affecting the well-being of memory. Trauma can shut down memory’s most essential functions and hinder it from operating efficiently. It may lead to fragmentation, intrusive thoughts, in addition to persistent flashbacks and nightmares.

On one hand, Freud sees that the repetitive re-enactments of trauma may lead to a severe damage on the mental apparatus of the victims of traumatic experiences. He argues that the cortical layer is the protective coating of this mental apparatus that “functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to [psychological or external] stimuli” (Freud XI). In case of the “breach” (23) of any external influences, the consciousness will not be able to process the shocking stimuli and the authentic reality of this experience will be repressed, resulting in the “traumatic neurosis.” The “traumatic neurosis” will lead to feelings of intense fear, anxiety and a state of prolonged silence, described by Dominick LaCapra as “the belated temporality

of trauma," in addition to "a compulsively repetitive manner" of "nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behaviour" (81).

On the other hand, Caruth argues that the traumatic memory lacks availability and authenticity of the events. Instead, the events manifest in a form of nightmares, flashbacks and intense state of disconnection from the external world. Thus, trauma represents itself in rough symptoms rather than stored narratives. Trauma is manifested as such because it is too rapid to happen yet too hard to grasp and surpass: unexplainable and unclaimed experience.

While dreams may be positive or negative since they are like a canvas for the subconscious mind where it paints impulses, desires and unfulfilled needs, nightmares, which David Morris defined as "memories gone wild" (12), embody themselves in a form of horrifying recollections of a traumatic event or events all at once. They usually represent the enigmatic part of the trauma. Flashbacks, however, come in a form of intrusive, mostly unwanted, vivid thoughts that penetrate the person's consciousness. Flashbacks hinder the efficiency of daily life functioning and lead to a state of emotional distress and overwhelm. Accordingly, memory is manifested in the form of dreams, flashbacks and nightmares, so much so that the victim is repeatedly reminded of the traumatic incident and recurrently wakes up in a state of high alertness. This repetitive recurrence of trauma stimuli will prevent the victim from the "full transcendence of acting out and reliving the past in its shattering intensity" (Freud 90). This continuity of individual traumatic history is more intense and severe, since it is not about the traumatic experience itself but about its prolonged aftereffects, As Caruth explains, "[…] trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event of an individual's past; but rather in that its very unassimilated nature[...] returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4).

4. The Poetics of Space

4.1. Reflections on Dwelling, Space, and Memory

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said delves into one of Gaston Bachelard's seminal works *The Poetics of Space* (1969), offering elucidation on Bachelard's poetic reflections on the intimate significance of space and place (house or home) in relation to one's sense of self and imagination, and the meaning we attribute to the sense of homeliness. He states,

> The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once wrote an analysis of what he called the poetics of space. The inside of a house, he said, acquires a sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imagined, because of the experiences that come to seem appropriate for it. The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus a house may be haunted, or homelike, or prisonlike, or magical. So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time. (55)

According to Bachelard's endeavor to understand the values of inhabited spaces, space is not mere inanimate objects and physical dimensions. More precisely, the significance of the spaces we inhabit does not only lie in its physical or impersonal qualities, but rather in the imaginative and poetic attachments and the emotional resonance it holds for us, which lends more meaning to it – home is more personal and internal. Significantly, by infusing spaces with our emotions, memories, and imagination, a house becomes meaningful through the subjective experiences and associations we attribute to it. In other words, home is what we make of it. Thus, the house serves as an analogy of one's interior soul, revealing how man dwells and offers a glimpse into his heart – a point we shall get back to.

In a similar vein, time too, with its fleeting and passing moments, is poetically endowed with the meaning we attribute to it, strictly speaking, through our memories. Furthermore, Bachelard explores the interplay between space, time, and memory. For him memories are motionless and anchored in space, while time is dynamic and provides a context and framework within which those memories exist. Moreover, the most vivid and enduring of which are those deeply rooted in specific spaces, implying that memories become stronger and more enduring when they are firmly associated with specific places or spaces. In other words, memories are not merely housed within as; they shape the spaces we dwell in. In turn, those spaces are where those memories are rooted and held,

> Space is everything, for time ceases to quicken memory. […] We are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed. We can only think of it, in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness. The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space. The unconscious abides. Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are. (57)

In this sense, space and memory are deeply interwoven, in that memory acquires a spatial dimension to it; more precisely, memories become intimate interior spaces. Over time, these spaces become sites of return and retreat, holding our past. When one encounters these places, the past vividly emerges in a suspended moment which transcends the present moment. In this moment of stillness, the beholder is left with his imagination.

Moreover, this explains why Bachelard emphasizes the importance of poetic imagination and the perception of places beyond its physical construct, for it reveals deeper ties and truths about belonging, and underscores the extent to which places are rooted within us and vice versa. In essence, for Bachelard, “such change occurs, when we re-enter the

dwelling of the soul and intensify the transformation of being: Our soul is an abode. And by remembering, […] we learn to 'abide' within ourselves" (19).

While these profound phenomenological reflections on dwelling and how man dwell, which holds a poetic essence, are explored by philosophers like Bachelard, it is worth-mentioning the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose reflections on the meaning of dwelling and being are central to his philosophical writings, which are developed in *Being and Time* (1927) and "Building, Dwelling,Thinking" (1971), albeit more complex and beyond the scope of this chapter. Despite that, it is worth highlighting the primary essence of his conception of homeliness and belonging. For Heidegger, we lose a sense of homeliness when we are encountered with the unfamiliar, which entails that rootedness, belongingness and being at home provides a sense of security to human beings. When this sense is lost, humans internalize a sense of the *unheimlichkeit* – (unhomeliness), as he calls it, "this feeling of being 'at home' within the familiarity of things only seems to give comfort and security, it only seems to satisfy human urge to be homely. In truth, however, while trying to feel homely among beings, human beings remain unhomely" (Svarnyk).

4.2. The Significance of Dwelling in The Arabic Classical Tradition

It is fair to acknowledge that both Bachelard and Heidegger provided insightful reflections regarding the notion of dwelling, in that the dwelling is an analogy of man's interior soul, as concluded earlier. Nonetheless, the allure of dwellings or abodes, in Arabic *dar or diyar*, never ceased to fascinate and inspire the masters of classical Arabic literature. Centuries before the dawn of modernity, this deep truth found its most eloquent and sophisticated utterance in one of the most famous opening lines of the Abbasid period poet,

famously known as Al Mutanabbi, who is praised by many as one of the greatest poets of the Golden Age and classical Arabic literature, in which he says,

لَكِ يا مَنازِلُ في القُلوبِ مَنازِلُ

أَقفَرتِ أَنتِ وَهُنَّ مِنكِ أَواهِلُ

To which Mohammed Ferghal provides the following translation,

Literal translation as follows,

You, (forsaken) homes, occupy (high) ranks in our hearts.

You have become deserted but still dwell in our hearts.' (12)

Poetic translation as follows,

You, abandoned home, lie high in our deeps

And our house rises higher as, forsaken, it sleeps (13)

It is no coincidence that a poet such as al-Mutanabbi links between the heart (bosom, core, or soul) and the dwelling, for humans inhabit body and soul. But dwellings can be *ruined* abandoned, ravaged, deserted, and forsaken. Leaving behind a *ruined*, fractured sense of self. Correspondingly, the poet Abu Tammam, another distinguished Abbasid poet, has captured this sense, having a distinguished conception from the conventional sense of standing before the ruined dwelling, as seen in the works of Imru al-Qais. Instead, Abu Tammam says,

لا أَنتَ أَنتَ وَلا الدِيارُ دِيارُ

خَفَّ الهَوى وَتَوَلَّتِ الأَوطارُ

كانَت مُجاوَرَةُ الطُلولِ وَأَهلِها

زَمَناً عِذابَ الوِردِ فَهيَ بِحارُ

To which Suzanne Stetkevych provides the following translation,

You are not you, the dwellings are not dwellings

Passion has ebbed, desires have altered.

The vicinity of the ruins and their people

That long ago was sweet to drink at, now tastes of salt.

4.3. The Motif of Ruins or Atlal in The Modern Literary Scene

Jaroslav Stetkevych observes that the motif of *al-Atlal* "seems to contain a whole people's reservoir of sorrow, loss, and yearning" (73), and it "has been taken up by the Arab writers to explore experiences and situations far removed from those for which it was originally conceived" (Kilpatrick 147). It showed that it can be revived and used time and time again in modern contexts. Significantly, it takes on its most evident modern guise in the work of the prolific Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, in which the relevance and the value of this cultural heritage is reinvented to problematize and dramatize the immense challenges which the Arab countries are obviously facing in a large scale of warfare destruction, and to comment on the modern change and the instability of history. To summon two of his poems, *Standing before the Ruins of Al Birweh*, written following the barbaric acts of the Israelis and the destruction of his home village *Al Birweh* in 1948, and *Jidariyya*,

I choose absence to describe it

Absence sat, neutral, around me

The crow saw it

Halt, my two companions!

Let us experience this place our own way

The poetic image that Darwish constructs upon his gaze at the ruins of the village that witnessed his childhood memories and where its joys and sorrows are painted and portrayed, embodies and reveals that the past is always present and visible and almost tangible in the fabric of the place, but the effect of destruction and ruination of such places can only be traced through absence; absence here becomes a powerful presence in itself, a void that speaks louder than words. What *remained* for Darwish "but the traces - [what *remains*], the

signs of absence" (Augé ix), and the heavy feelings of what is no longer present. These traces are the signs of absence that hint at what once was, even if the full picture is no longer accessible.

One of the most moving yet beautiful reflections upon ruins are yet to be found in his masterpiece *Jidarriyya,* which is worth quoting at length here,

> One of the people of this plain . . .
> On the barley festival I visit my radiant
> ruins [atlali al-bahiyya] like a mark [washm] upon my identity
> the winds don't disperse them nor do they harden them . . . / (J, 75)
> What I said to ruins [al-talal]: Farewell. For I only was
> what I was once. I only was one
> …
> time, which sufficed to know how time breaks apart
> like a bedouin's tent in the northern wind
> and how place splits and wears the past
> fragments of an abandoned temple.
> Everything around me looks like me
> and I look like nothing here

The line "ruins [*atlali al-bahiyya*] like a mark [*washm*] upon my identity" echoes Abu Tammam's, that the abandoned and *ruined* dwelling leaves a mark on one's sense of self, a fractured and *ruined* self. Moreover, Darwish echoes the essence of the ancient *Atlal* motif, in which time breaks apart and place breaks and wears the past. The motif remains a staple in modern Arab fiction and popular culture. It prominently appears in films and songs, especially by the iconic singer Fairuz. This theme evokes a deep sense of nostalgia and reflection and continues to resonate deeply within the contemporary scene.

In conclusion, this chapter has laid a detailed theoretical foundation to better frame the discussions and analyses in the subsequent chapters. By delving into the core principles and frameworks, we have attempted establish a solid contextual and conceptual map that will hopefully enhance the understanding and incorporations of these reflections within the context of the novel.

Chapter Two:

Tracing Wounds in Words: The Poetics of Narrative Trauma in *The Corpse Washer*

This chapter will provide a close reading of the novel in light on the established connections of the theoretical chapter. Mainly, it focuses on the vignettes of Antoon's central character in war-torn Baghdad. By examining how wounds are made to speak, it will explore how Antoon's portrayal gives voice to the wound. The analysis will demonstrate how the unspeakable is articulated both thematically and textually. The aim is to show how Antoon's narrative brings the unspeakable to the forefront, allowing it to emerge using fragmented narrative, intricate surreal imagery, coupled with grotesque elements and poetic language.

1. "Nightmares of Wakefulness": Iraqi Double Woundedness

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth argues that the "original traumatic experience" is re-enacted in the memory of the survivors or the traumatized individuals. This idea as she calls "a double wound," (4), causes long-term impact and continues to perpetuate unrest in their life. In fact, these deep wounds that were inflicted, whether from personal or collective tragedies, cannot be healed or surpassed. The fact that they are too traumatizing, makes it nearly impossible to cope and adapt to their destructive inside-out repercussions, eliminating all attempts of closure, resolution and inner peace. Moreover, all attempts to forget, heal and move forward are hindered by the echoes of past trauma in memory, through the repetitive re-enactments of the painful events in nightmares, dreams and flashbacks. As Freud stated, the "unhealed wound," […] imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (3). Thus, nightmares and flashbacks are the manifestation of trauma, which causes the most damage and impedes the process of surpassing the traumatic experience.

The Corpse Washer, a contemporary form of tragedy, as the English version of the title suggests, stands as a historical and profoundly poetic narrative sculpted by death. It meticulously delineates evocative vignettes from Jawad's turbulent life. A story of a wounded young man who grapples with inescapable loss, death and incessant horrifying nightmares, which cast a dark shadow over his life and shape his bleak outlook towards the world around him, he narrates his personal journey with the hopes of his exuberant youthfulness crashed by his unhinged reality. In this novel, Antoon succeeds in capturing and novelizing the series of traumatic experiences of Iraqi people, which unfolded rapidly within a condensed timeframe, spanning from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. Almost three decades of dictatorship, wars and violence have turned Iraqi people into traumatized characters and shaped their melancholic and despondent perception towards the external world. This analysis maps the prolonged trauma that Iraq, under the prolonged years of successive wars and unescapable death, has witnessed.

1.1 The Omnipresence of Death and Loss

This novel, at heart, represents a trauma inflicted by the bloody reality that the land of Tigris and Euphrates has undergone, through the wounded protagonist Jawad; a traumatized individual representing the traumatized everyman of Iraq. Thus, in this narrative, the focus is not mainly on the war itself; rather, Antoon employs it as a backdrop and a context to shed light on its brutal repercussions, particularly death and loss, considering that the previous studies have not directly focused on the repercussions of the traumatic experiences of Iraqi people. Instead, their focus was solely on the causes rather than the trauma and its aftereffects. As such, death emerges as the central and dominant theme in the novel, if not the main character, aiming to substantiate the omnipresence of death and the indelible scars it left. It is depicted as a shadow looming, rooming and haunting Iraqi people nonstop, and especially the wounded hero of this story Jawad who, in his consciousness and unconsciousness, suffered

the ongoing hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks, which eventually led to a fractured sense of self.

This harrowing state was engendered predominantly due to the enormous amounts of corpses that made the work in the *mghaysil* – the washing house where the rituals of washing and shrouding the dead take place – more hectic and distressing, a place Jawad sees as a site of death and trauma, he describes: "death's traces – its scents and memories - were present in every inch of that place. As if death were the real owner" (*Corpse* 11). In fact, the *mghaysil* can serve as a symbolic indication and a miniature image of Iraq, both sharing and retaining the permanent smell of death for decades.

This perpetual interaction with the deceased during his waking hours and even in periods of repose, is a constant reminder of the inevitability and obsession of death with Jawad. He remarked how death is like a postman, delivering daily reminders of its inevitability, and he is the one receiving them without any respite. This metaphor underscores the omnipresence of death in Jawad's life and highlights the enduring influence it has on his memory, a memory of death and corpses; Jawad says, "my memory became a notebook for the faces of the dead" (140), adding, "If death is a postman, then I receive his letters every day. I am the one who opens carefully the bloodied and torn envelopes. I am the one who washes them, who removes the stamps of death and dries and perfumes them, mumbling what I don't entirely believe in" (3).

The tradition of corpse washing was essential and honored within their Shi'ite Muslim community. Therefore, his father started the gradual training and taught him the rituals of corpse washing, preparing him to inherit the family traditions of becoming the next *mghassilchi* (corpse washer). This is a responsibility accentuated by the loss of his brother Ammoury, who left for his training to be a doctor but was killed during the Iran-Iraq war. Additionally, the economic crisis of Iraq, the ravages of war and the fact that his academic

career came to a halt when the academy of Fine Arts closed due to the war, obliged him to work as a corpse washer for a living and relinquish his inspirations for an artistic career in which life is potentially immortal.

In addition to the constant interaction with corpses, the loss of his pillars of support – his Ammoury, his assistant Hammoudy, and his father too – compelled him to embrace a reality he did not desire and get engaged in a trade he was not interested in. Becoming a corpse washer instead of being a sculptor was the fate dictated by the agonizing circumstances and the sense of duty, rather than his choices and desires.

After the US incessant attempted to destroy and ruin Baghdad, Jawad's hometown turned into chaos and rubbles. This went hand in hand with the demise of his artistic ambitions and his hopes of having a bright future, to justify the heart-wrenching state of Jawad which shattered, ruined and left him in a state of existential confusion. Jawad's experience of trauma is complex and multifaceted; in fact, it is a combination of many losses he had; deaths of his family members and the death of his aesthetic inspirations. Kai Erikson argues that trauma does not result from a "single assault" or "discreet event" but from a "constellation of life's experiences, a prolonged exposure to danger or a continuing pattern of abuse" (457). Death was hunting Jawad relentlessly, the faces of the dead bodies and the corpses that are "scattered all over the streets and stuffed in fridges" (*Corpse* 87) were his only truth. He was not able to understand how his father could live with this truth, "I was astonished by my father's ability to return to the normal rhythm of life, […] I imagined that death followed me home." Unlike his father, he was seeing death in every corner of his house and every aspect of his life; he adds: "I couldn't stop thinking that everything that father had brought for us was paid for by death. Even what we ate was paid for by death." (22). Though he rebelled against carrying on the family tradition, yet the circumstances and his unescapable

fate decided otherwise. He confirmed: “Is death punishing me because I thought I could escape its clutches?” (3)

In two distant phases of his miserable life, Jawad was romantically involved with two different women. Both relationships ended, not because of unrequited love, but due to the harsh reality in which he was trapped, which celebrates no love or marriage. He sought consolation in the form of a simple love story, first with Reem, who left him after learning that she developed breast cancer. Her disappearance left indelible scars in Jawad’s heart and intense fear of intimacy, that he seemed unable to fall in love once again, “I knew that my heart was a hole one could pass through but never reside in,” (114) Jawad says. Yet he was denied a few moments where he could forget his miserable life in the embrace of his beloved. In her essay, “War and Violence in Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer,*” Radwa Ramadan explains that Jawad’s love relationships “provide welcome reprieve from the chaos that is powerfully overwhelming them” (49). Jawad failed to reach out and save these relationships, because he was fluctuated, damaged, traumatized and “full of death” (*Corpse* 123). Herman argues that the traumatic experiences may cause a significant damage to human relationships, family ties and trust (51). Jawad believes that in this meaningless life he cannot look forward to a promising future with his loved ones, since his life is fully controlled by death whose “fingers were crawling everywhere” (*Corpse* 104).

Years go by, and Iraq is still under slaughter and bombing, becoming something, they are “accustomed to after each attack: puddles of blood, human remains, scattered shoes and slippers, smoke, and people standing in shock, wiping their tears or covering their faces” (161), still in the throes of war and violence, unable to heal the wounds but verbalize it. Post-2003 Iraqi literary narratives attempted to illuminate and unveil the spectacles and horrors of violence and torture, by giving voice to the unspeakable. Not only giving voice, but more

essentially intervening in dominant misleading media discourses that misrepresented or did not acknowledge the roots and practices of such extreme violence.

1.2 Nightmarish Reality

According to Ramadan, *The Corpse Washer* is a "trauma novel" on two dimensions: the first is the traumatic experience of the protagonist Jawad, the second is historical dimension of the wounded Iraq (49). Years of ongoing wars changed the land of prosperity, art and civilization to the land of blood and death. Additionally, Ramadan states that Jawad's suffering and nightmares are symptoms of his traumatic experience (51).

As previously mentioned, nightmares, dreams, and flashbacks, can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event; trauma is the outside has gone inside without any meditation (Freud 5). This cyclical repetition, in the consciousness and the unconsciousness, defines and shapes Jawad's life.

Antoon's novel opens with a haunting and intense description of the protagonist, having an unsettling and disturbing nightmare, which, as Freud pointed out, wakes the dreamer up in another fright (5). In the dream, Jawad found himself obliged to wash the corpse of his long-lost lover, seemingly alive, lying naked on the marble washing bench as she tells him "Wash me so we can be together" (*Corpse* 1). This erotic, confusing scene, shifts abruptly to an unspeakable violence of an intense body dismemberment, as masked men attack them. Suddenly, Jawad sees himself beheaded, then wakes up. In this repetitive dream sequence, this nightmare serves as a vignette, wherein readers get a glimpse into the recurring cycle of dreams and nightmares, where repetitive patterns of the traumatic event tend to be vividly manifested. In Shoshana Felman's words, "our memory repeats to us what we haven't yet come to terms with, what still haunts us" (76). This, in turn, doubles the wounds and intensifies the traumatic burden carried by Jawad, who poignantly remarks: "death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my

sleep. Isn't it enough that I toil all day tending to its eternal guests, preparing them to sleep in its lap?" (*Corpse* 3).

In Antoon's story, as explained earlier, trauma came a result of the incessant series of deaths, and the multiple losses Jawad has witnessed. Antoon depicted the gloomy life of Jawad in death-possessed Iraq, a place where the boundaries between life and death blur, a space where nightmares and reality intersect. Jawad felt confused, unable to distinguish between his between the two; both equally traumatizing. As Judith Herman explains, "traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images," adding that "the intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality" (38). These nightmares bizarrely assimilate his traumatizing reality, devastating and damaging him further. In another nightmare that embodies Iraqis "unhealed" wounds, through the deep wounds of his beloved Reem, Jawad recounts:

> I see Reem standing in an orchard full of blossoming pomegranate trees, the wind moves the branches and the red blossoms appear to be waving from afar […] I am closer and I see two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breasts. She notices that I am looking at them and smiles as she cups them with her hands from below. Her fingernails and lips are painted pomegranate red. I rush toward her, and when I reach her and hug her, the left pomegranate falls to the ground. When I bend down to pick it up I see red stains bathing my arm. I turn back and see Reem crying as she tries to stop the fountain of blood gushing from the wound. (*Corpse* 123)

The Corpse Washer is highly emblematic in the sense it embodies death, agony, passivity and trauma par excellence, through the recurring portrayal of gloomy and dismal reality and terrifying nightmares. Jawad says: "I feel a sharp pain, then the cold blade of the knife penetrating my neck. Hot blood spills over my chest and back. My head falls to the

ground and rolls like a ball on the sand…," adding, "I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood" (2).

Jawad admits: "I felt for the hundredth time what a stranger I'd become in my hometown and how my alienation had intensified in these last years" (185). This feeling of isolation, non-belonging, and meaningless life is what Herman identifies,

> It is difficult for traumatized individuals to see beauty in life and indulge in many activities that other people do because of the inner darkness and the sense of isolation they experience which leads them to lose any opportunity to enjoy life […] Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, 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. (33, 49)

This quote effectively embodies the state of Jawad, since he actually feels disconnected from the external world, a stranger in his hometown and unable to protect his relationships and his loved ones. Jawad feels alienated, abandoned and fully connected with death. These feelings were not confined to Jawad, because "everyone in Baghdad felt like a stranger in his own country. Most people were drained, and the fatigue was clearly drawn on their faces" (*Corpse* 181). It was a prolonged collective catastrophe that resulted in a prolonged collective trauma and accumulations of pain, "piling wreckage upon wreckage" (38), to quote Walter Benjamin's words. Sometimes, despite all human attempts to survive and cope with the extreme events, they exert such an intense influence on people's lives and alter their equilibrium. Thus, one traumatic event may taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. This tyranny of "the past interferes with the present and makes life colorless" (qtd in Vickroy 12).

The moment where Jawad realized the reality of death, and his connection to it, the reality that like the pomegranate tree, death gives him life. Full of passivity and resignation, He was not able to "wake up from this endless nightmare of wakefulness," he was living his days "exclusively with the dead" (131). Death, in one way or another, stole his father, brother, loved ones, dreams and ambitions, leaving him fully damaged, incessantly haunted by its shadow. As much as like his favorite statue of Giacometti – stretched, distorted, with his feet anchored in the ground, motionless and stuck due to the heavy weight he carries – Jawad was dragged down by war's turmoil and anarchy, compelled to his unfortunate reality, unable to reach the life he is longing to, "emerging from the unknown and striding towards it" (42).

Traumatic experiences, as discussed in this section, produce enduring scars and wounds and exert long-term effects on the individual's memory, eventually leading to a severely wounded memory. The recurring and re-enactment of those experiences in the form of reality-like horrifying nightmares, results in a double woundedness and leads to unceasing attempts of survival and healing, with no efficacy or progress achieved.

2. Speaking the Unspeakable

This section will look at Antoon's narrative and the ways in which unspeakability and incomprehensibility are channeled through a hauntingly poetic and fragmented aesthetic. It will demonstrate how experience is both shaped and given form, thematically and stylistically, through visceral imagery coupled with moments of silence and interruptions. By looking at vignettes from Jawad's life, we see a world where words often fail, but the weight of the unspeakable speaks louder.

2.1. Scattered Narratives and Speaking Wounds

In his essay "Art as Technique," Victor Shklovsky famously states "the technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length

of perception," because "habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war […] and art exists that one may recover the sensation of life, it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*" (20). In this sense, art should forge active perception and break the numbing effects of habit, rather than just passive perception. This is what literature does; it experiments with form and content to make us perceive life anew. It makes form difficult and involves not only the content or subject matter but also the form in which it is presented.

In the Hegelian sense, the concept of form and content as a dialectic space has been influential in understanding the relationship between the aesthetic aspects and the thematic elements of the body of any artistic work. Particularly, how both form and content interact in various aspects of reality, including art and literature, emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence between form (the structure, style, or presentation) and content (the substance, meaning, or message) in any literary work. Undoubtedly, the body of a text is a space for experimenting with new forms of artistic writing. The stylistic features that characterize it are themselves part of the artistic form that shapes the content. In this sense, the way the writing is presented informs and is significant as much as the narrative, the plot, and the characters. We can go further to add that, strictly speaking, there is content in the form.

In the same vein, we can delve deeper into specific aspects of form, stylistic choices and techniques that invoke unconventional ways of seeing and engaging with texts. Fragmentation, broken chronology, plotlessness and nonlinearity are among those aspects of form that not only shape the way content is presented but also significantly alter experience and perception. These aspects inscribe themselves into the body of the text, fundamentally shaping its very form, rendering it broken and "wounded."

Jeffrey Sychterz astutely points out, “the wound opens the body and undoes a previously closed narrative (141), indicating that the fragmented text metaphorically represents a state of being wounded. He also contends that “the wound tells a story, Homer knew this, for wounds and scars play central roles in both of his epics” (137). Thus, the wound carries a story, wherein the story of the wound, in the Caruthian sense, speaks with a voice - a voice that cries out.

By the same token, the story of modern Iraq is a story of an open wound that cries out and refuses closure. Hence, these wounds are embodied through narratives which bears its traces, for words are the traces of wounds. Arguably, these narratives are far from being linear or unified, and resist any established single coherent story, this fragmentariness is “indeed, […] a material manifestation of the impossibility of reconstructing a coherent narrative to describe the nightmarish Iraqi wars, for there is no such thing as *the* story after 2003, but rather, there are stories bursting out of the body of the text (Khammas 321).

In *The Corpse Washer*, the narrative unfolds in a disconnected storyline and fragmented stories, all bursting as shards of memory into broken bits and pieces. Thus, the narrative takes the form of a montage of countless segments, series of juxtaposed surreal nightmares, blurred memories, interfering flashbacks, and episodic plotline with a disrupted temporality. This fragmentation in form mirrors what Ghazoul previously asserted, namely, that “life in Iraq is depicted in juxtaposed scenes rather that plots” (3), highlighting the episodic nature of Iraqis’ encounter with the magnitude of war and its prolonged pain, which cannot be presented in a straightforward manner. For war is a never-ending and ever-returning experience, leaving an ever-open wound. Each scene in the novel unfolds as a disjointed piece of a larger confusing puzzle, with no clear demarcated progression, beginning or end. Which leaves the reader to piece the segments together, to look into the vignettes of Jawad’s cruel

life as a corpse washer, and try to make sense of Jawad's state, who is caught up in an endless loop of nightmares.

Just like Samuel Beckett, Antoon is also fond of circular time. *The Corpse Washer* opens with a nightmare, where Jawad sees his beloved Reem, laying naked on the marble washing bench. This nightmare is narrated through several different segments throughout the novel, with minor changes each time,

> The same nightmare had been recurring for weeks, with minor changes. Sometimes I saw Reem's severed head on the bench […] The image of Reem being dragged away by her hair keeps returning […] I see Reem standing in an orchard full of blossoming pomegranate trees […] I walk toward her and call out her name, but I can hear neither my own voice nor the sound of my footsteps. All I hear is the wind rustling. (*Corpse* 12)

This eternal, ever-returning circularity is inherent in the circular narrative structure which reveals itself to be more of a spiral. The novel's time structure creates a temporal simultaneity, which reflects the extent to which Jawad is trapped in a time loop, where past, present, and future seem to collide.

Later on, in chapter twenty, the same nightmare reoccurs, this time with a blend of surrealism. Jawad tells us,

> I am standing next to a washing bench. It isn't in the *mghaysil*, but rather in some other place I've never visited. […] The bench is very long. It extends for tens of meters and has a white conveyor belt. Bodies are stacked on it. The belt moves toward the right and leads to a huge opening, and outside men wearing blue overalls and white gloves carry the bodies and throw them into a huge truck. … 'What are you waiting for?' … I look everywhere, but Father has disappeared from every corner. The corpses keep moving to the opening of the conveyor belt. (75)

These nightmares do not only haunt Jawad in his sleeping hours, but reflects his nightmarish lived reality which, as Nadia Atia points out, “has been reduced to a never-ending conveyor belt of corpses … an endless stream of bodies; a seemingly endless stream of suffering” (9).

In *The Corpse Washer*, nightmares intertwine with reality, the boundaries between the two are indistinguishable. The nightmares themselves diversify and are of an odd arrangement, some are lengthy and some comprising only a few lines. This odd assortment reflects the fragmented nature of Jawad's existence, where scenes from the waking world meld with surreal imagery born from the depths of his subconscious. As the novel progresses, this blending intensifies within the narrative, compelling the reader to confront the unsettling truth that Jawad's nightmares have permeated his waking existence. The lack of clear division underscores the pervasive grip nightmares have on his life, emphasizing the profound impact they exert on his perception of reality. The journey through Jawad’s labyrinthine memory confronts us with a haunting truth: nightmares have become an inextricable part of his consciousness, turning his waking hours into “nightmares of wakefulness,” and blurring the lines between what is real and what is imagined.

Stylistically, this blend of surrealism coupled with a nightmarish atmosphere tends to govern the narrative. Throughout the novel, Antoon relies on “the dream like sequences” when narrating Jawad’s life in war torn Baghdad, a life seemingly unimaginable and unreal and thereby depicted as surreal. In *The Corpse* Washer, the boundary between reality and dream is often blurred. As André Breton famously put it in his “Manifesto of Surrealism,”

> I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession. (32)

In addition to this fusion between reality and dreams, the incorporation of the surrealist aesthetic paves the way from the unconscious to the conscious, to reveal something felt internally. More specifically, it reveals the nonlinear nature of internal reality, which is often marked by confusion and incomprehensibility. Much like the surrealists, who sought to capture the essence of this confusion and incomprehensibility, the novel also provides a faithful portrayal of such disorienting experience. A portrayal reminiscent of Salvador Dalí's paintings, for instance, where we find dreamlike imagery coupled with melting clocks, distorted figures, vast landscapes, all loosely visualized in an intricate symbolism and with a meticulous attention to detail. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon creates visual compositions within Jawad's nightmares, for instance "a crying eye hanging on the wall longing for another" (*Corpse* 177), "talking lifeless corpses" (70), "dozens of corpses coming from every direction in an empty and vast landscape" (71), "dissolving statues on the marble washing bench" (71), "gazing faces with hollow sockets" (12). Some of these compositions are better highlighted in the following scene,

> One of Giacometti's statues lies on the washing bench. I assume I am meant to wash it. As I pour water over its tiny head, the sculpture dissolves into tiny fragments. I put the bowl aside and try to pick up the pieces and repair the damage, but everything disintegrates in my hands. (150)

Significantly, other nightmares take the mode of eerie *memento mori* moments. In chapter one, for instance, Jawad witnesses the act of his beheading,

> Two men force me to get down on my knees and tie my wrists with a wire behind my back. One of them puts a knife to my neck; the other blindfolds me. I try to run away, but they hold me tightly. I scream again, but cannot hear my screams […] I feel a sharp pain, then the cold blade of the knife penetrating my neck. Hot blood spills over

> my chest and back. My head falls to the ground and rolls like a ball on the sand […]
>
> I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood. (11)

Later in another nightmare, he lays on the bench waiting to die: "I touched my body and was astonished that it was intact. I ran to the exit and out to the street. I headed to the *mghaysil* and opened the faucet to wash myself. I lay down on the washing deck to die, but instead I awoke. (120). Often, these moments are constantly interrupted by the moment of Jawad jolt awake in a sudden burst of high alertness. These constant interruptions not only lead the way from the state of real to the imagined, but further create a slower pace in the narrative:

> In Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, the narrative of dreams and nightmares —which interrupts the lineal narrative yet completes it— takes a slower pace and involves an abstract, poetic use of the language as opposed to the narrative of thoughts and events which tends to lead to a quicker pace and a more realistic tone. (Khammas 317)

Moreover, this aesthetic, mirrors and embodies what Maurice Blanchot denotes as the disruptive nature which characterize "the fragmentary." The narrative performs an unbearable incompletion and unfulfillment, through the gaps and silences, which disrupt the narrative yet contribute to the meaning, by evoking a sense of the unspeakable, the incomprehensible. This will lead us to focus on another element, that of the grotesque.

3. The Liminality of the Grotesque

The central dilemma in *The Corpse Washer* is Jawad's encounter with death, and the ugliness of life with all its grotesqueness. The grotesque essence at the heart of the novel takes a liminal space between two opposites, it is intricately woven around the idea of life infusing death, and conversely, death giving rise to life.

Jawad dwells on the boundaries of liminality between life and death, as he is "living exclusively with the dead," neither fully living nor fully belonging to the realm of the dead. Instead of becoming what he always dreamt of, a sculptor, bringing stone to life, he is forced

to “tending to [death’s] eternal guests, preparing them to sleep in its lap” (*Corpse* 12). On the washing bench, he witnesses all sorts of pain and terror,

> A bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back, mutilation by electric drill, headless body, fragmentation caused by suicide bomb […] I was on my way home one day when I realized that aside from Mahdi and my mother, I was living my days exclusively with the dead. (131)

The manifestation of life and death can be traced throughout the entire narrative. Death itself takes on a vivid form, almost coming to life with its own distinct setting and voice: “Death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep […] I can almost hear death saying: I am what I am and haven’t changed at all. I am but a postman” (3). In fact, the motif governs the entire atmosphere of the novel and takes on many forms. The paradox inherent in Jawad's destiny as a corpse washer juxtaposed with his aspiration to be a sculptor creating art that breathes life into the inanimate, serves as yet another poignant manifestation of the liminality between two opposites.

This manifestation raises the question of symbolism, imagery, and metaphor, which are yet to be found in the presence of the pomegranate tree in the backyard of the washing house, where Jawad spends most of his hours washing, shrouding and preparing the piled-up corpses to their final destiny. This tree, for years, grows and blossoms from the water used to wash the dead. In this sense, it feeds on death, in that death brings life. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Mikhail Bakhtin writes,

> In the grotesque body […] death brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation. The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image. (322)

The element of the grotesque takes yet another form. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon alludes, as mentioned earlier, to the modernist Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, whose thin, fragile and skeletal statues, not only become a source of admiration and inspiration for Jawad, but also an embodiment of his own sense of self. What drew Jawad's attention is Giacometti's vision: "He said that what he'd wanted to sculpt was not man but the shadow he leaves behind" (*Corpse* 52). Jawad, furthermore, says,

> His statues were conspicuously thin, as if they were threads or thin mummies exhumed out of tombs. The body was always naked and with minimal features. Some works were of a hand waving alone without a body. Humans, in Giacometti's world, be they men or women, appeared sad and lonely, with no clear features, emerging from the unknown and striding toward it. (52)

Reinhold D. Hohl says that Giacometti's "new style projected an air of despair and loneliness. The frail scarred bodies he created reflected those of the survivors living in post war Paris" (Britannica). For Jawad, this embodied his life surrounded by corpses, frail and fragile as it is.

The Corpse Washer "indulges in all sorts of beheadings and physical and emotional atrocities in order to give meaning to the absurd violence Iraqis live through, and to give way by which to channel the suffering" (Restuccia 6). However, Antoon's lyrical prose adeptly does so by putting the reader in connection with what is deemed to be unfamiliar and alien to most of us. For the lyrical, the poetic and the heft of words leave an impress on us. Antoon wanted to construct a narrative that must display his own ethical role in tending to the suffering and pain of others; he describes the indescribable and puts in place a trace and impress of the pain being described, however, with delicacy and tenderness, which can be highlighted in some passages such as: "we finished washing and shrouding a nine-year-old boy. He needed only wings to look like an angel … The dead man looked like a newborn in swaddling clothes" (*Corpse* 30).

Because, as Caruth points out, the language of trauma is literary, it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. It combines emotional gravity with the use of symbolism and imagery because this can only be addressed or acknowledged by a figurative, imagistic, symbolic language. In the same vein, James Berger follows to state that,

> Trauma theory is, in many ways, ultimately a theory of metaphor; it is a way of thinking about how some extreme event or experience that is radically non-linguistic, that seems even to negate language, is somehow carried across onto language […] trauma is a metaphor generator. (83)

As this chapter has tried to demonstrate, Antoon's narrative channels a concern with acknowledging and tending to the pain of the corpses, which is insistently foregrounded in the prose. The delicacy and tenderness in approaching details and description of Jawad and the act of washing and shrouding the corpses demands our witness and empathetic eye. The prose dwells on the liminal space between beauty, pain and ugliness. In *The Corpse Washer*, the wounds, scars, and pain of the dead are made to speak, simultaneously defying and demanding our witness. Moreover, the narrative succeeds in mimicking the enigmatic essence of such a disorienting experience, which, Antoon skillfully portrays through the aesthetic elements explored throughout the chapter.

Chapter Three:

"The Mute Immortals Speak": Traces of Ruination in *The Corpse Washer*

"It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you,

even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence"

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of The Disaster*

The final chapter of this study will look at how war-traces are manifested through the aesthetic use of the ruins to evoke a forsaken past. In the novel, the motif of ruins carries layered connotations, in that they speak personal yet fragile truths. This chapter will also demonstrate how the novel takes this fragility to call our attention to precious, sacred notions of place along with memory and the fractured self, all reflected in ruins; for places of significance wear our past, absorb memories, the changes of time, and our sense of belonging and rootedness, shaping our perception towards abstract notions only for those who bother to look.

1. Signifying Ruins

Antoon, who is a poet as well, is aware of the tradition of his aesthetic ancestors and masters. In a recent interview this year with *Jadaliyya*, following the publication of his collection of poetry "Postcards from the Underground," he pointed out,

> [The] poet cannot look away, but he stops to salvage moments of bliss and beauty from the ruins of history. […] As a poet, I find myself standing before the ruins of history (Iraq is but one site). It was obligatory for pre-modern Arab poets (my aesthetic ancestors and masters) to begin their poems by standing before the real or imagined ruins and remains of a beloved's encampment to contemplate and confront time and history. I have come to

> appreciate this iconic topos in the last few decades … [T]hat topos crystallizes and encapsulates our encounter, as a species, with time, nature and history. What to say and write as one stand before the ruins. The ruins of one's life, city and homeland.

In modern times, modern Arab writers are putting into question their encounter with the past and the cruelty of history. Antoon is one such author who actively questions his own encounter with his ruined homeland. In these dark times, those writers return to what Bertolt Brecht once famously states, "in the dark times/will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing /About the dark times" ("Bertold Brecht in Dark Times"). They returned to their poetic heritage, to their past, in the hopes of finding an answer to their ravaged- present. Their return is a commentary on the instability of history; as Georg Lukacs always reminds us, "if there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes" (113).

In *On Ruins and Ruination* (2016), Ann Laura Stoler writes, "to think with ruins […] is to attend to their appropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present (11). Moreover, if we agree with what Hilary Kilpatrick says, "the *aṭlāl* motif becomes linked to the reflection on modernisation in the Arab world" (147), and given that the novel as a genre is the hallmark genre in modern times par excellence, the migration of the motif to the prose narrative "gives new responsibilities to the novel" (148), to use Robyn Creswell's words. To recall Lukacs once again, "the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (120).

In his novel, Antoon voices his concerns about the bitter irony of history through his narrator. Jawad says, "history is random and violent, storming and uprooting everything and everyone without ever turning back (*Corpse* 185). In the novel Antoon is the lover standing before the ruins of his homeland. He expresses the ruthlessness of history and the devastation wrought by those who wield power carelessly and the randomness of historical events, illustrating how they indiscriminately uproot lives and destroy communities,

"A Lover Pauses before Iraq's Ruins"

> Who resembles whom? There are millions of Iraqis and as many, or perhaps somewhat fewer, palm trees. Some have had their fronds burned. Some have been beheaded. Some have had their backs broken by time, but are still trying to stand. Some have dried bunches of dates. Some have been uprooted, mutilated and exiled from their orchards. Some have allowed invaders to lean on their trunk. Some are combing the winds with their fronds. Some stand in silence. Some have fallen. Some stand tall and raise their heads high despite everything in this vast orchard: Iraq. When will the orchard return to its owners? Not to those who carry axes. Not even to the attendant who assassinates palm trees, no matter what the color of his knife. (107)

The metaphor of Iraq as an orchard of palm trees poignantly captures the fate of the Iraqi people, who have suffered immensely due to the actions of those in power. The burned fronds, beheaded palms, and uprooted trees symbolize the casualties of war, highlighting the reckless gambles taken with Iraqi lives by those who sought power and control at any cost. These images emphasize the tragic irony of history: those responsible for the decay and destruction often get away with their actions. In Iraq, palm trees which are a symbol of rootedness and stillness, are rendered uprooted and without a purpose, just like Iraqis.

Moreover, Antoon voices a profound skepticism about history and the myth of progress. He portrays history not as a linear narrative, but as a cyclical struggle, symbolized by the perpetual conflict between statues. This metaphor reflects Antoon's concern that history often glorifies the past and its heroes, creating myths that obscure the reality of suffering and destruction. By refusing to celebrate the myth of the past, Antoon challenges the reader to confront the harsh truths of history: the constant presence of violence, the fragility of human progress, and the recurring nature of human conflict. His narrative suggests that progress is an illusion, a constructed narrative that fails to account for the enduring scars left by war. Thus,

Antoon sees history not through the lens of glorification, but through the lived experiences of those who have endured its most brutal impacts. He writes,

> *History is a struggle of statues and monuments, Father. I will not have a share in all of this, because I have yet to sculpt anything important. Even Saddam's huge statue in Firdaws Square was brought down right after your death. I thought I would be happy since I detested him so much, but I felt I'd been robbed of the happiness. That was not the end I had imagined. Those who brought him down were the ones who put him there in the first place. They armed him to the teeth in the war that killed Ammoury, your favorite son. Now some want to sever the head of Abu Ja'far al-Mansour, the founder of Baghdad, and bring down the statue of the poet al-Mutanabbi. Even the statues are too terrified to sleep at night lest they wake up as ruins.* (113) [emphasis in the original]

Significantly, ruins in this novel envisage the nexus between place along with self and memory. Jawad's experience before the ruins that was once whole opens a window unto a forsaken past, a trip down memory lane. He leaves his gaze to find its way to memories, which were lost and wiped away underneath the rubble. The gaze upon the actual scene that depicts the material inflicted wreckage and ruination is a moment of fusion of both – a two-way mirror to the housed, internalized ruins and an open-ended direction. For place has the authority to offer a sense of homeliness, but it too has the authority to deny it. Jawad sifts through the ruins trying to make his way through rubble, but cannot be distinguished from the ruins, he becomes the ruins. He recounts,

> I felt a pang in my ribs when I saw heaps of ash everywhere … I remembered the hours I had spent reading and leafing through glossy art books here. This is where I had been captured by the works of Degas, Renoir, Rembrandt, Kandinsky, Miró, Modigliani, and Chagall, de Kooning, Bacon, Monet, and Picasso. This is where I

> spent hours poring over images of statues by Rodin and Giacometti, my beloved Giacometti … I stood there for ten minutes, letting my eyes wander, then walked toward the audiovisual arts department. I passed by the bench where Reem and I had sat many times. Two students were perched on it. I greeted them in passing. I saw the face of Picasso, which occupied the wall of the department of plastic arts to the right. His features looked sterner that day. (84)

In *The Corpse Washer*, place wears the veil of ruins, stretched like a corpse – ruins are corporeal and human-like,

> The rubble was piled up … I climbed through the debris. When I got to a point high enough to see into the building, it looked like a corpse that had been skinned and then had its entrails burnt and its ribs exposed … charred and parts of the collapsed ceiling and shards of glass glittered in the sunlight. The empty seats and walls, which had witnessed so much before, were now blinded by blackness. I climbed back over the mound of rubble and felt the wreckage I'd been carrying inside me mount even higher, suffocating my heart. (84)

With his encounter with the ruins of a place that once witnessed so much, memories shatter and his inner soul fractures. Inside of Jawad's heart, the wreckage dwells and resides, unlike the pre-Islamic poet who return to his heart, contemplating intimate memories of a bygone beloved. In Antoon's novel, at the gaze of ruins, he encounters a sense of unfamiliarity, resulting in an internalized feeling of unhomeliness. Ruins do not hold the intimate spaces of memories; instead, at the ruins, Jawad is at the edge of memory, a moment of collected memories, fragmented just like ruins.

In this respect, Suzanne Stetkevych interestingly points out that "ruins are motionless, silent, and immortal, human life is transhumant, and transient. […] And yet it is only man, the mortal, who can read [their] message" (22). Those ruins bear the truth, the truth of his

immortality: they are mute, voiceless, and inanimate, until given voice. To conclude what has been discussed, in the novel ruins are made to speak, they speak for the silenced. The mute immortals speak, to echo Suzanne's book title; they speak despite and against forgetfulness, erasure and the ravages of time, they are mute and silent but they speak the disaster, to counterpart what Blanchot says, "It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence" (14).

Moreover, the novel provides a meditation on the notion of belonging and homeliness – a redefinition of belonging and a search of a sense of homeliness amidst the ruination of one's homeland and roots. When one's tie with a place that once housed and witnessed so much is cut, the weight of the decay speaks the void of the traces. As shown in the previous passages, place and past wears the veil of ruins. The following section will narrow the focus on ruin to the city of Baghdad.

2. Baghdad Personified: The City in Ruins

"The ruin does not supervene like an accident upon a monument that was intact only yesterday. In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait"

Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993)

The novel is set in the city, a landmark notion of modernity, where reality, and man's existence is but fragments of selves and "a heap of broken images" (20), in T S Eliot's words. Baghdad in Antoon's world emerges as an "Unreal City", just like London in Eliot's *The Wasteland,* where corpses are planted. The city is the self-portrait of its subjects which share the same fate. Just like Jerusalem, Athens, and Alexandria, so too is Baghdad's fate,

What is the city over the mountain
Cracks and reforms bursts in the violent air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (371-377)

In his interview with *Jadaliyya,* Antoon states, "Baghdad, my hometown, has a rich cultural history. The heart of pre-modern Arab/ic culture for centuries, it attracted poets and philosophers—and plundering invaders as well." He witnessed from afar the barbaric acts the United States have been committing against his homeland, and the destruction of what had been standing for centuries as the capital of Arabic innovation and culture. In his novel, ruins are also portrayed in the cultural debris; Antoon alludes to the cultural ruination inflicted upon his hometown, namely the famous al-Mutanabbi Street, which did not spare the carnage inflicted on the rest of the country,

> In Baghdad's long history, the legend of al-Mutanabbi Street occupies a special place. Named after one of the most celebrated poets of the Arabic language, Abu al-Tayyib Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi al-Kindi. [I]t has been renowned for its numerous, quaint, old-fashioned bookshops and popular cafes, [namely, the Shahbandar Coffee House that had attracted throngs of scholars in years past]. For a long time, it served as a gathering spot for the poets, writers and intellectuals of the city. A stone's throw away from a giant statue of the iconic poet standing by the Tigris river, al-Mutanabbi Street has been especially popular on Fridays when a bevy of musicians, singers and artists showcase their talents and ply their music, enthralling onlookers. It is a living testament to the old Arab aphorism: "*Cairo writes, Beirut prints and Baghdad reads*." (Amir)

The novel not only emerges from the ruins of war, but also waves ruins into its narrative fabric. Both ruination and fragmentation are used textually and thematically to convey the spatial woundedness of the city, portraying pre/post-war Baghdad. The city *of The Arabian Nights,* shifted from being a symbol of history, literature and arts in the Middle East, to a symbol of fragmentation, ruination and destruction. A place where the physical presence of rotting corpses arrest and torment the living, a place that can no longer be claimed solely by those who draw breath. Antoon captures and gives voice to the exasperation of place, its utter dread at the breaking of the day with the knowledge that more of the dead and dying will tragically pepper its streets and quarters once reserved for the living (Al-Shamali 16). Under the mercy of occupation, Baghdad became a land integrating besides death and blood, destruction and ruination, as shown in this quote: "this was a process of erasure. […] Now we had entered the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all" (Antoon 95), so it would become a site of ruins and corpses.

Death and destruction invaded the land of the pomegranate tree. Iraqis witnessed devastation, lived with devastation, escaped devastation, yet themselves were devastated. Destruction and ruination were not something new to Iraq, since they suffered the atrocities of war since the 1980's. The war of eight years with Iran was the genesis of the prolonged years of suffering. Yet, the destruction inflicted on Baghdad in 2003 caused mass death and turned Iraq into hell, which lasted through years of carnages and bombardments. Citizens were tortured, jailed during Saddam's regime and aggressively killed after the US invasion. Jawad states: "I always used to say that Baghdad in Saddam's time was a prison of mythic dimensions. Now the prison had fragmented into many cells with sectarian dimensions, separated by high concrete walls and bloodied by barbed wires" (*Corpse* 186).

Correspondingly, not only were people attacked, but the atrocities of war extended beyond the suffering of individuals, to encompass the damage inflicted upon the land as well. Historical sites, cultural symbols, monuments and artefacts that stood for centuries, and were testimonies of civilization for generation after another, were torn down and destroyed and in the blink of an eye. As a matter of fact, "The sectarian strife turned Baghdad into a city of ghosts. Streets were deserted, shops were closed and people lived in extreme fear of being killed by the other side's fighters" (Al Jazeera).

In Antoon's narrative, the chaos and destruction were effectively depicted throughout the novel. It pictured how Baghdad "has changed so much" (*Corpse* 94), how "it looked sad," war-torn, hunted by death, shackled and disfigured by dictatorship, that "even the statues are too terrified to sleep at night lest they wake up as ruins" (113). In an interview and in the light of the destruction and ruination that was inflicted upon Baghdad, Antoon confessed: "the US bombed one of the city's bridges across the Tigris. It was my favorite bridge. I stood on the bank with tens of Baghdad's inhabitants looking at the bridge. It looked like a broken smile." (Handal)

In the intricate weave of Antoon's narrative, Jawad's turbulent journey resonates with the turbulent history of Iraq, specifically his hometown Baghdad. Jawad's internal chaos mirrors the external destruction and turmoil plaguing his homeland. His inner world is an unveiled tapestry that is made of the refractions of Iraq's fractured memories. With each passing day, the toll of death and destruction grows heavier, making it nearly impossible for him to collect his shattered fragmented self. With each corpse he washed, each death and loss he witnessed, with each bomb that falls and each site destroyed, his soul, as much as like his homeland, was marked by a sense of ruination.

3. "The Pomegranate Alone": A Living Ruin

In one of his diaries' entries, Franz Kafka ponders a paradoxical truth about those individuals who had their lives altered. He emphasizes that those who are deeply ruined "see different and more than the others," in that they are granted a more profound insight unto life, which other people might have been blinded to acknowledge,

> Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate … but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor. (85)

At the novel's closing scene, Jawad finally learns the bitter truth about life and death, despite his countless failed attempts to escape its clutches, and his firm belief that by becoming an artist sculpting life, his life was sculpted by death. He is confronted with his cruel fate, shattered hopes, and broken dreams. Next to the pomegranate tree, *the wonderous tree,* which has become his sole companion in life, he sings to it and ponders,

> I was going outside to sit next to the pomegranate tree … It has become my only companion in the world.
>
> Pity me, pity me
> O Pomegranate tree
> I've become skin and bones
> And nobody knows (*Corpse* 183)

Just like him, "its red blossoms had opened like wounds on the branches, breathing and calling out […] Like me, this pomegranate's roots were here in the depths of hell. Do the roots reveal everything to the branches, or do they keep what is painful to themselves?" (183), Jawad wonders. His father always used to tell his that "the Prophet Muhammad said there is a seed from paradise in every pomegranate fruit" (183), but this tree has been drinking and living on the water of death for decades now, "but always budding, blossoming, and bearing fruit every spring. Is that why father loved it so much?" (183). Yet instead of standing in paradise, the tree stands still, alone amidst death and ruins; Jawad contemplates, "but paradise is always somewhere else. And hell, all of it, is here and grows bigger every day. Like me, this pomegranate's roots were here in the depths of hell" (183).

In these moments, Jawad learns that to live is to bear the impersonal truth about this uncaring world. The pomegranate tree knew it all: despite having its roots in this hell, and living on death, it continues to bear fruit every spring; it bears the impersonal truth about life and death. Eventually, he is confronted with the inevitable truth that life and death are but two sides of the same coin shaping and sculpting each other, "I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries. But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other. My father knew that, and the pomegranate tree knows it as well" (185). Antoon's protagonist is a living ruin, his "heart has become a shriveled

pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit" (185). Jawad's life with death day and night defines Iraq's modern tragedy.

At the end of this tragic novel, the reader finds himself summoning quotes and reflections about the tragic truth of human experience. This is a truth that never ceases to reoccur time and a time again, starting from the very first tragic hero of literature *Gilgamesh*, whose long searching journey into the meaning of immortality eventually confronted him with the same truth that Jawad kept repeating: "The living die or depart, and the dead always come" (185). To invoke a modern example, Khalil Gibran famously writes in the final line of his short story "The Grave Digger", "he was alone at his end, except for the dead who were all around him" (83). Gibran's connotation might encapsulate a dual truth, the literal and the metaphysical, but Jawad's fate as a corpse washer is concreate; at his end he is all alone, except for the dead and the corpses around him,

> I am like the pomegranate tree, but all my branches have been cut, broken, and buried with the dead. My heart has become a shriveled pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit. But no one knows. No one. The pomegranate alone knows. (184)

As shown in this chapter, the novel takes ruins as a vantage point to reconstruct notions of the city, the ruined self, ruined places, and the past. Antoon does not try to glorify history or the past; he provides an unfiltered account of a deceiving history that handed his homeland to death and ruins.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to provide a close reading of Antoon's narrative in order to trace how it speaks to the reality of Iraq's tragedy. Antoon's narrative succeeds in providing an unfiltered and faithful portrayal that both problematizes and dramatizes the traces of war, through a narrative that bears witness to the wounds and ruins. By examining these elements closely, this study aimed to trace how wounds and ruins are embodied in the narrative. In his novel, these wounds and ruins are given a voice; they hold a truth and call for our attention to the gruesome reality of war, forcing us not to look away as Antoon traces the detritus of his homeland, which has metamorphosed into ruins.

Moreover, this dissertation explored how Antoon's narrative engages aesthetically and ethically to narrate a forsaken past in one important chapter of modern history. By looking at personal stories through the eyes of his wounded protagonist, who beheld all his dreams and aspirations in ruins, Antoon's work provides a dramatic and poetic mediation on fragile yet precious stories born out of the shattered heart of Baghdad.

Additionally, Antoon’s choice of ending for his protagonist underscores a critical truth. The image of Jawad standing alone, surrounded only by the dead, emphasizes the notion that we, the living, are indebted to the dead. It serves as a stark reminder of the responsibility of the living to remember and honor those who have perished.

Finally, Antoon's novel offers a meditation on the ruination of selves, dreams, souls, homes, habitats, humans, and homelands. By delving into these themes, the narrative does not just recount the devastation of war but also engages the reader in a deeper reflection on impersonal truths.

In conclusion, this dissertation has tried to demonstrate that Antoon's narrative is a powerful testament to the enduring scars of war. *The Corpse Washer* compels us to confront

uncomfortable truths and to engage with the stories of those who have lived through unimaginable realities. Antoon's work channels his ethical concern in bearing witness to the past, ensuring that the voices of the wounded and the ruins they inhabit are neither forgotten nor ignored. Through this close reading, we hope to have afforded a deeper understanding of the intricate ways in which literature can capture and convey the multifaceted imprints of war, placing Antoon's narrative within the broader contemporary literary scene.

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