



عندما يتحدث الموتى و تكسر الاصوات:  
سرد الصدمة و البقاء في رواية سنان أنطون غاسل الجثث

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ملخص البحث:

تحكي رواية غاسل الجثث (٢٠١٣) للكاتب سنان أنطون قصة جواد وهو "رجل طيب و رجل هادئ الصوت" الذي تولى على مضض مهنة عائلته التقليدية في غسل جثث الموتى في عراق ما بعد الغزو الأمريكي. يناقش هذا البحث كيف يستخدم أنطون المفهوم المانوي للجسد الصامت/ الصوت المكسور للتعبير عن الصدمة غير القابلة للتمثيل للعيش في اللحظة الحالية في العراق. من خلال إخضاع النص لقراءة متأنية مطلعة على الصدمة وما بعد الاستعمارية تركز على غسل الجثث كوسيلة للشهادة على المعاناة الجماعية واختبار قدرة السرد على تمثيل العنف المفرط. يُظهر المقال كيف تولد التقنيات السردية لأنطون شاعرية على البقاء التي تمنح الموتى حقهم مثل الأحياء و تعطي شكلا نصيا جديدا من الانبعاث لتُحافظ على الذاكرة ضد القوى التي تريد نسيان كل شيء.

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# When the Dead Speak and Voices Break: Traumatic Narrative and Survival in Antoon's the Corpse Washer

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**Abstract:**

Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013) narrates story of Jawad, "a good and a soft-spoken man," who reluctantly inherits his family's traditional profession of washing the bodies of the dead in post-invasion Iraq. This study examines how Antoon employs a Manichean conception of silent body/broken voice to articulate unrepresentable trauma of living in present-moment Iraq. Through subjecting the text to a close reading informed by trauma theory and postcolonial critique, the article focuses on corpse-washing as a means of bearing witness to collective suffering and interrogates narrative capacity to represent excessive violence. The article demonstrates how Antoon's narrative techniques generate a poetics of survival that grants the dead their due alongside the living, and produces a new textual form of resurrection to preserve memory against forces that seek total erasure.

## Section One

### Introduction

Following the 2003 U.S. occupation of Iraq, Iraqi literature has been challenged by the daunting job of narrating unprecedented levels of violence, deportation, and social disintegration. Among the brightest talents that have emerged from this literary terrain is Sinan Antoon, whose 2013 novel *the Corpse Washer* provides a haunting meditation on trauma and endurance in present-day Baghdad. The novel tells the story of Jawad, a young man who is compelled to abandon his artistic dream for the generations-old family business of washing and readying the dead for burial in accordance with Islamic practice.

It is a deep paradox that Antoon focuses on in his narrative strategy, those corpses Jawad takes care of can't speak, but their mangled bones provide eloquent testimonies of the violence that has assailed Iraqi society. By contrast, the living subjects are frequently at a loss for words before the enormity of their trauma, their voices shattered by events that fail to fit the norms of representation. This interplay of mute body and shattered voice becomes the core tension of the novel, rendering what Cathy Caruth describes as the "unclaimed experience" of trauma: it "cannot be organized on a linguistic level, yet demands articulation"<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper, the researcher suggests that *the Corpse Washer* enacts the ritual of preparing the dead in order to figure this practice as a metaphor for witnessing, as well as serving as an ethico-aesthetic consideration of what it means to represent situation and collective trauma. In what follows, the researcher considers how Antoon constructs a poetics of survival responsive to questions of both individual pain and cultural memory that disputes historical erasure, using an analysis framed through trajectories of trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and works on testimonial literature.

In order to appreciate the narrative innovations of *the Corpse Washer* it is

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1 Caruth, C. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 62.

necessary to contextualize it within larger theoretical conversations on trauma and testimony. Cathy Caruth's seminal work on trauma theory foregrounds the temporal dislocation of traumatic experience itself: "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in one's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Such conceptualizing of trauma as a disruption in time that refuses to settle into linear tale-telling is a key framework for reading Jawad's disjointed narratives that are scattered all throughout this fictional prose of the novel.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's writing on testimony literature sheds additional light on the struggle involved in this trauma literature. They claim testimony "seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance"<sup>2</sup>. This brokenness continues at points all across *the Corpse Washer* as Jawad's story bounces from one time and place to another, mirroring the incoherence of traumatic memory.

In the context of Iraqi literature, writers continue to be described as engaging in a form of "narrative resistance," i.e. as producing literature that "challenges the dominant discourse of occupation and sectarian violence"<sup>3</sup>. This lens is essential for understanding the ways that Antoon's novel does not simply represent trauma but is shaped actively by it as a mode of cultural preservation and resistance. "Narrative resistance" in *The Corpse Washer* is used via a complex interplay between magical realism and native cultural traditions by which local cultures and values stand firm in the face of Western views towards Iraq. Antoon employs magical realism to take readers out of the immediate world of war-torn Iraq, mak-

2 Laub, D. Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening. In S. Felman & D. Laub (Eds.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Pp. 57-74) (Routledge, 1992), 5.

3 Al-Musawi, M. *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Brill, 2018), 143.

ing a dialectic between the natural and the supernatural<sup>4</sup>. Antoon fortifies his resistance to that storytelling by adopting modernist and postmodernist strategies that fracture the traditional narrative, echoing the shattered state of Iraq. Antoon uses modernist and postmodernist strategies to depict the trauma of Iraq's history through narrative methods of memory, foreshadowing, and flashback.

## Section Two

### The Language of the Dead Bodies as a Text of Violence

In *the Corpse Washer*, Jawad comes across bodies that tell the story of why Iraq is such a violent mess. Instead, these bodies are texts to be read, their wounds and disfigurements a brutal lexicon of modern Iraqi experience. Antoon writes that:

Each body told a story. The stories were similar but the details varied. A bullet to the head. A severed hand. Burns from acid. Signs of torture. Bodies were texts, and I was forced to be their reader, their interpreter. But I was a reluctant reader of a language I never wanted to learn<sup>5</sup>.

This passage lays the novel's central metaphor, where the corpse as text and Jawad as an involuntary reader. The idea of how dead bodies are "read" is taken from Michel de Certeau's (1984) understanding of the body as a social and political site of inscription, where political and cultural forces are written onto the flesh of the individual. These corporeal inscriptions are testaments to the collapse of political formations and the disintegration of social forms in post-invasion Iraq.

4 Wael Salam J. and Abu-shomar, Ayman "'Life in Death': Decolonizing Trauma in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*," *Style* 58 (2024): 22–45.

5 Antoon, S. *The Corpse Washer* (Yale University Press, 2013), 67.

The specificity of the violence described, "bullet to the head," "severed hand," "burns from acid", reflects what Elaine Scarry identifies as the "unmaking of the world" that occurs through systematic violence<sup>6</sup>. Each wound is not just a personal tragedy, but forces on to the fracture of a social fabric in which Iraqi society was previously woven. Jawad's function as the "reader" of these texts makes him a witness to this unmaking, one who must translate the language of violence that is inscribed on human bodies.

Notably, Jawad identifies himself as a "reluctant reader", drawing attention to the ethical weight of witnessing. This resistance is not just individual but indicative of larger issues of witnessing and representation. As Giorgio Agamben notes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the witness bears "the burden of bearing witness in the name of those who cannot bear witness"<sup>7</sup>. As a washer of the dead, Jawad finds himself in that complicated role of witness to those who can no longer speak on behalf of themselves.

While *The Corpse Washer's* corpses speak through their wounds, its living characters are frustrated by the crumbling of the authority of narrative as convention. Jawad's voice throughout the novel is marked by hesitation, repetition, and temporal confusion, reflecting what Dori Laub describes as the "collapse of witnessing" that can occur in the face of overwhelming trauma<sup>8</sup>.

The fragmentary voice of the novel is echoed by its narrative; the work's chronology is not linear, but marked by frequent oscillations between past and present. Every time Jawad tries to tell his story something else intervenes to capture his attention, a constant barrage of traumatic flashbacks:

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6 Scarry, E. Penn State University Press (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 45.

7 Agamben, G. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Zone Books, 1999), 120.

8 Felman S. and Laub, D. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992), 81.

I try to tell this story in order, but order has abandoned us. Memory comes in fragments, like pieces of a broken mirror, each reflecting a different angle of the same terrible truth. Sometimes I start with the day I returned from New York. Sometimes I begin with my father's death. Sometimes I can only begin with silence<sup>9</sup>.

This passage thematizes the problem of traumatic narration purportedly all literature of suffering, yet, ironically, only able to be made visible by her reading for its psychic depths and surfaces. The metaphor of memory as shards of a broken mirror signals not only the scattering but the reflecting back of images, this inability to construct a seamless, cohesive totalizing-narrative of post-trauma. The reference to "order" that has "abandoned" images moves beyond personal psychology to render the breakdown of social and temporal order across post-invasion Iraq.

The various potential starting points that Jawad identifies, his return from New York, his father's death, silence itself, reflect what Dominick LaCapra calls the "aporias of testimony," the inherent paradoxes and impossibilities within traumatic narration<sup>10</sup>. Each potential start point provides an alternative gateway into that trauma, yet none encompass or explain the whole. The practice of the washing of the dead body is also a cultural act of resistance in the novel. The ritual of washing the dead functions as cultural resistance in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* because it embodies a preservation of Islamic and specifically Iraqi cultural identity against forces that seek to dehumanize and obliterate that identity. Washing the body, in Islam, before burial is a symbol of purification and a way of showing respect for the deceased. The deceased is believed to have returned to God, and performing this ritual ensures that the body is cleansed of any impurities before the journey:

9 Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 23.

10 LaCapra, D. *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 186.

My grandfather washed bodies during the monarchy. My father washed them through the republic, through wars and sanctions. Now I wash them through occupation and sectarian slaughter. The ritual remains the same, but the reasons for death multiply<sup>11</sup>.

This passage establishes the ritual as a form of temporal continuity that transcends political change. The parallel structure of the sentences, "My grandfather washed... My father washed... Now I wash,"<sup>12</sup> gives a sense of generational transmission that continues across different political authorities. However, the final observation that "the reasons for death multiply"<sup>13</sup> suggests an increase of violence that threatens to devastate even this ancient ritual. Antoon, here, talks about Iraqi situation during the invasion in which death toll increased and Iraqi people used to see dead on TV or in streets.

The corpse washing ritual functions as what James Scott calls a "hidden transcript" of resistance, a practice that maintains cultural identity and dignity in the face of domination<sup>14</sup>. By keeping these rites and rituals, Jawad and his family maintain not only religious traditions but also a form of human dignity that the hovering violence seeks to abolish.

Anthropologist Robert Hertz's classic study of death rituals offers further perspective on the politics of corpse preparation. Hertz maintains that funerals are not only for religious purposes but also for social purposes. They help the community to structure and experience the collective trauma<sup>15</sup>. In *The Corpse Washer*, the washing ritual helps process the collective trauma of Iraqi society even as it keeps the connections to cultural tradition.

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11 Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 89.

12 Antoon, 89.

13 Antoon, 91.

14 Scott, J. C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press., 1990), 4.

15 Hertz, R. *Death and the Right Hand* (Cohen & West, 1960), 83.

The Corpse Washer is preoccupied with issues of memory and historical heritage. Jawad struggles a tightrope walk between remembering and forgetting, between bearing witness to horror and protecting himself from its annihilating force. This tension is represented in his childhood notebook, which he used to jot down his artistic aspirations at the time:

I found my old notebook yesterday, the one where I used to sketch and write poems. The pages are yellow now, brittle with age and neglect. I wanted to write something new, but my hand shook. How do you write beauty when surrounded by death? How do you preserve hope when hope itself has been murdered?<sup>16</sup>.

The notebook functions as a material archive of Jawad's identity before trauma, which represents the possibility of artistic expression that has been rendered by his conditions. The physical wear of the notebook, "yellow now, brittle with age and neglect" <sup>17</sup>, reflects the decline of the cultural and social world that once fostered artistic creation. The questions that Jawad raises, "How do you write beauty when surrounded by death? How do you preserve hope when hope itself has been murdered?"<sup>18</sup>. It tackles essential questions about, on the one hand, the role of art and beauty in the wake of trauma. These questions respond to Theodor Adorno's famous declaration on the barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz, and posits the need to write even though, or perhaps because of, such conditions<sup>19</sup>.

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16 Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 134.

17 Antoon, 135.

18 Antoon, 138.

19 Adorno, T. W. *Prisms* (MIT Press, 1983), 34.

The work implies that memory can also perform as an act of resistance against the work of erasure. In his narrative, Jawad performs the duty of the living to keep the dead alive, what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory", the transmission of trauma across generations through narrative and testimony<sup>20</sup>. When Jawad preserves memories of the dead, not just their bodies but their tales, their humanity, their individual worth, he is declining to let them vanish into the unknown that war and occupation attempt to enforce. This remembering turns to be his sacred duty as one of the living, guaranteeing that those who died are not just forgotten numbers but they are living in in collective memory as full human beings.

Jawad can't help but filter his own about being a returned exile, which adds a twist to the novel's focus on trauma and displacement. His New York life as a young art student is a time when he could have potentially fled his family's traditional role, but his father's death compels him back to Baghdad and the obligations of corpse washer. The juxtaposition between New York and Baghdad is not merely between two different locales but between two different ideas of modernity and tradition, of personal freedom and family responsibility. Jawad's art instructor in New York advises him to find his own voice and break free from tradition, advice that proves both liberating and ultimately impossible to follow<sup>21</sup>.

The theme of return is further complicated by the violence that has overtaken Baghdad since Jawad left. The city he comes back to isn't the one he left, creating what Edward Said calls the "estrangement" of exile, the feeling of being foreign in one's homeland<sup>22</sup>. This estrangement is exacerbated by the fact that Jawad's study as an artist in New York has taught him to view his inherited position as that of a corpse washer with fresh eyes, leaving him a part of and apart from his own cultural heritage.

20 Hirsch, M. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

21 Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 45.

22 Said, E. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

The novel intimates that such a liminal region, betwixt diaspora and homeland, tradition and modernity, art and ritual, grants Jawad unique access into Iraqi pain. His life in two disparate worlds allows him to become a conduit for Iraqi experience for cosmopolitan and local readers alike.

*The Corpse Washer* concludes not in resolve, but in a somewhat uncertain affirmation of the prospect of survival and testimony. As the novel draws to a close, Jawad meditates upon his status as witness and actor in Iraqi history:

I am the bridge between the living and the dead. I wash their bodies and prepare them for their final journey, but I also carry their stories with me. In this way, they are not truly dead. They live on in memory, in testimony, in the words that I speak when words are possible<sup>23</sup>.

This passage articulates the novel's central insight: that the act of bearing witness, even broken, fragmentary witness, and a type of resurrection. By "carrying their stories,"<sup>24</sup> Jawad transmutes the corpse washing ritual into a way of preserving culture and transmitting memory.

The phrase "when words are possible"<sup>25</sup> recognizes that the spoken word is never completely adequate in the face of trauma, but also that we are never absolved from speaking. This conditional nature of testimony is also in step with what Geoffrey Hartman describes as the trauma text's "modest ambition," that is, not to represent the unrepresentable in its fullness, but to provide sites for partial understanding and empathetic bridging<sup>26</sup>.

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23 Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 198.

24 Antoon, 138.

25 Antoon, 141.

26 Hartman, G. *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 152.

## Conclusion

The *Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon is a deep meditation on what might be the potentials and limits of traumatic narrative as it is lived and wrought present-day plights Iraq. With its central metaphor of speaking bodies and broken voices, the book grapples with the intricate interrelation between individual suffering and collective memory, between silence and testimony, tradition and modernity. The innovations of the novel are not in how neatly it resolves these tensions, but how fully it is willing to occupy them. By placing Jawad, at once, as a participant in and a spectator of Iraqi trauma, Antoon's narrative voice develops a capacity to contain all manners of contradictions at the same time: the sacred and the profane, the personal and the political, the local and the global.

Most importantly, the *Corpse Washer* shows that documenting, even partial, or imperfect, can be a way of cultural withstanding and survival. In a society where the people's history has been under attack and the result is a systematic attempt at destroying and erasing that history, storytelling, remembering, becomes more than just a means of survival; it is a form of power. The title of the novel itself seems indicative of this twofold purpose: the corpse washer is, on the one hand, someone who washes the dead so that they can be buried, and, on the other, he (through the act of attestation) prevents the dead from withdrawing into darkness, and fades out of existence. The *Corpse Washer* finally suggests that what it means to survive the aftermath of events like these is not to make us whole again, such things are utterly impossible for veteran and civilian alike, but to discover means of fractured beauty, new forms of being able to speak that respect the limits of language and our own necessary complicity in the ongoing act of bearing witness. Discussion of these issues, the novel leaves a valuable mark in the territory of Iraqi literature and world trauma discourse that goes well beyond its cultural domain.

The force of the novel lies, for me, in the lack of cheap consolation or false hope it can bring, even as it insists there remains room for meaning to fold disaster. In Jawad's reluctant but plucky testimony, Antoon conjures a poetics of survival that pays homage to both the dead and the living, holding memory as an antidote to historical obliteration while recognizing the profound cost of such considerations.

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