



Art as Cultural Glue in Sinan Antoon's The Corpse Washer

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ABSTRACT

The cultural fragmentation of Iraq is a rich ingredient to be studied from the postcolonial perspective. Iraqi culture is incarnated in Antoon's postcolonial diasporic literary text *The Corpse Washer* (2010), which is a paramount novel that depicts how the indigenous culture has been distorted in Iraqi society due to colonial ideologies. Antoon's novel concentrates on the impacts of these ideologies on the Iraqi indigenous culture leading to the influence of the revolutionary spirit of Iraqis. It also demonstrates the Iraqi people who experienced feelings of marginalization due to internalizing the colonial culture through different educational institutions such as schools and universities. The study explores how Antoon uses a Western version of art as a medium for incarnating the effects of the colonizer, helping to rewrite history with a native perspective. The study also investigates how the postcolonial diasporic novel *The Corpse Washer* in the literary canon can help to restore the indigenous Iraqi culture for the indigenous people in the homeland and the diaspora. It works as a cultural glue for cultural fragmentation due to the colonial subject. The paper underlines Iraqi society's cultural means and symbols in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* during American colonization.

Keywords: art, cultural glue, indigenous culture, literature

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INTRODUCTION

Ferial J. Ghazoul is a prominent Iraqi scholar, critic, and translator. Currently, she is a professor at the American University in Cairo. Ghazoul (2009) claims in her article "Literature and the Arts in Contemporary Iraqi Culture" that Iraqi writers and artists are cultural heroes (234). Sinan Antoon is considered one of them for illuminating Iraq's sad realities (Elimelekh 231). He emphasizes artistic products as a savior to protect the indigenous culture from being affected, damaged, and even replaced by other cultures as the culture of dominating colonial countries. Antoon exhibits one of the significant effects of colonialism on the indigenous culture by focusing on artistic fields to reduce the traumatic condition of the cultural spirit of the colonized country. The colonizer attacks the institutions that cultivate new generations by educating them to increase the cultural heroes in that country by graduating artists and writers. The target institutions are schools and universities.

Sinan Antoon is an Iraqi American novelist, poet, and translator. He was born in 1967 in Baghdad, Iraq. His parents were from Iraq, and his ancestors were from Iraqi Assyrian (Chaldean), also known as the Christian minority in Iraq. He was raised in Baghdad until he got his undergraduate degree from Baghdad University in English

Literature in 1990. Antoon chose English literature studies at Baghdad University as his major, which offered him many choices in his life. During the second Gulf war in 1991, he left Iraq to settle in the U.S. During his stay, he enrolled at Harvard University to get a doctorate in Arabic literature and was awarded a PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies.

The Corpse Washer and Its Publication

Sinan Antoon published his first novel *I'jaamin* (2003) in Arabic, which has been translated into six languages. After a great success in his first novel, he made up his mind to write and publish his second novel in Arabic under the title *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (in English means: The Pomegranate Alone) in 2010. This novel received wide recognition from different parts of the world. At first, it was translated into English in 2013 by the writer himself under the title *The Corpse Washer*, which is completely diverse from the Arabic title, then it was translated into more than ten languages. It received many prizes such as Independent International Fiction Prize, Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, and the Best Arab American Book in 2014 for literary translation.

Alberto Manguel, an Argentinian-born Canadian essayist, translator and novelist, who has a remarkable in criticism on his credit, describes Antoon's novel, *The*

Corpse Washer as one of the most extraordinary novels that he has read in a long time. “It’s setting is war-torn Iraq, but its theme is the ageless tension between persistence and resignation that defines our mysterious human condition (“About”). And Rohit Chopra adds in his article “A Chronicle of the Death of a Civilization” describing *The Corpse Washer* as “a tale about the destruction of a society. It is a chronicle of the visceral, material obliteration of every aspect of the being of that society, from its infrastructure to its cultural institutions, from the relationships that form the basis of its communal life to its sense of itself as a body politic.” The Chinese scholar Chen Hao a professor in School of Foreign Language of Shanghai University, describes it in his paper “*The Corpse Washer: An Ontological Critique of Counter-Terrorist Discourse and Iraq War,*” as one of the few novels that examines the war from the perspective of Iraqis and penetrates into mainstream Western discourse, through the author’s diasporic experience with two cultures. And he continues by saying, the novel itself also breaks down the barriers of religion and nationality, focusing on the exploration of how the universal value of human beings can break through and be redeemed from the ravages of violence (126).

In the late of 1980s, he joins Baghdad’s Academy of Fine Arts,

challenging his father’s wishes to follow his steps and is determined to fulfill his dream. But the political situation in Iraq has a different impact. The savage policy of the dictatorship and the embargo after the second gulf war dismantles the socioeconomic fabric of the Iraqi society. In the third gulf war in 2003, Iraqi society was under military invasion causing chaos leading to sectarian conflicts. The street views are full of conflict and violence with corpses everywhere. Consequently, the protagonist prefers to live under the diasporic conditions rather than staying in the homeland. All attempts to be outside the homeland are failed. Therefore, he goes back to fatal profession of washing and shrouding the dead bodies. Being an artist gives him a chance to incarnate the pain and violence to represent life aesthetically which make a sense in his life. Now, he keeps his inspiration on the possibility of death to affect daily life of the Iraqi citizens especially those who inhabit in Baghdad. His experiences with hybridity of having two cultures, the modern and traditional cultures, inspire him to incarnate the impacts of colonialism on the indigenous culture as nonviolent resistance.

The protagonist experiences two kinds of traumas; first, before the 2003 war when Iraq was under the embargo imposed by the USA. Second, the trauma of invasion comes after 2003. Both events destroy the

fabric of society due to the weakening of the socioeconomic perspective of the Iraqi community. That creates an impact on the structure of Iraqi identity. A well-known critic, Habeeb, states that *The Corpse Washer* addresses the physical destruction followed by psychological trauma caused by the rule of dictatorship and the impact of the 2003 invasion (iii). It is noticed from the events in the novel that the protagonist's ambition has been destroyed. Another critic, Yebra, comments that Jawad's aspiration to be an artist is part of identity construction, but it has been scattered (5). However, the author gives some hope that the lost identity might be restored. Again, Yebra adds that the cultural tradition can amend what has been sabotaged by the violence of the war (9).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The cultural value of any nation is estimated through its production of art. Art represents the sensory nerve of the cultural skeleton of the nation. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines art as "the use of imagination to express ideas or feelings, particularly in painting, drawing or sculpture" (Hornby 71). Art or visual art comes under the umbrella of literature. Literature is a form of art that uses imagination to reflect writers' notions in the shape of literary forms such as novels, novellas, short stories, dramas, and poems. Literature is a broad scope to cover all art

forms that exist through the imagination process, including writing and visual arts. These outcomes mainly concentrate on social, cultural, and political deficiencies. However, in postcolonial countries, artists and writers focus on the impacts of colonialism on the indigenous culture.

To focus on the link between literature and art, many novelists incarnate art to show the mutual relation between literature and art. They start with Jane Austen, who implies art as an effective weapon in changing one's unchangeable impression. In *The Picture of Dorian* (1891), Oscar Wilde presents art to mirror the decadence that flows from his picture of the fragile, hedonistic realm of eternal youth. Virginia Woolf also uses art in her novel *To the Light House* to show art as a way to restore past events and revive lost moments. In the contemporary era, many writers also target the significance of art to reflect social, cultural and even political issues. One of them is the Iraqi-American diasporic writer Sinan Antoon who pays much attention to art as a way to gather the cultural pieces of fragmented Iraqi culture due to American colonization.

In most cases, Ferial J. Ghazoul claims that arts such as literary and visual art are underestimated in modern Iraq, especially in the last three decades, due to Western inference (233). She establishes a link between the artistic products and the

indigenous culture to be relevantly connected (Ghazoul 233). These products can resist the stereotypical images created by the Western media to marginalize the Iraqi indigenous culture. As a torn land, Iraq is under the impact of the cultural hegemony of Western countries, which legitimizes colonization to fade the resistant spirit inside the Iraqis. As well as they devalued all the literary works and visual art to show the colonized countries as wounded with no hope to stand again; Iraq is a good example (Ghazoul 233). Thus, literary products and visual art function as cultural glue to stick all the fragmented cultural pieces after being shattered by the colonizer. The French painter Marcel Duchamp interlinks the relationship between art on one side and culture and society on the side. He describes art as a cultural and social glue, one of the ways social members have demonstrated what they stand for and value, strengthening their bonds with one another (Omwake 199).

A Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Northwestern University, Andrew Baruch Wachtel, argues in his book *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*; that the building and collapse of a nation are based on the artistic and literary products which determine the presence and absence of the cultural glue in that nation (4). Yugoslavia and Iraq are

similar through their long experiences with colonialism, and their societies share some features in common as they are multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. Therefore, building a new Iraq requires a cultural revolution to break down the colonial impacts and restore the indigenous culture through the artistic and literary works of the cultural heroes; Sinan Antoon is a good example.

The Analytical Study of *The Corpse Washer*

Antoon reveals that the educational systems in schools pay no attention to art classes. His protagonist, Jawad, says, "Arts classes were ignored..." (*The Corpse Washer* 32), and even there are no assigned art classes to teach the students to help them be artistically prominent figures in the Iraqi culture. At the same time, the novel presents that the schools are designed with no art rooms. As the ruling class deliberately intends to widen the cultural gap in Iraqi society, the young generation lacks cultural values and has no sense or taste in art. Still, some people as Mr Raid Ismael, who works as a schoolteacher, encourage the protagonist and his colleagues to polish their artistic skills by showing them hope that they would become cultural heroes someday against the powerful ideology in erasing this sense.

The Corpse Washer displays life as an eternal theme of art in which every aspect of new life inspires the artists to represent it through art. The novel gives much importance to art in keeping the indigenous culture functioning, leading people to preserve their identity from being lost. Jawad talks enthusiastically about art as a link with immortality. It is a celebration of life. Then he talks about the past of Iraqi culture, which is inherited in contemporary times. He says,

...our ancestors in Mesopotamia were the first to pose all these questions in their myths and in the epic of Gilgamesh, and that Iraq was the first and biggest art workshop in the world. In addition to inventing writing and building the first cities and temples, the first works of art and statues had appeared in ancient Iraq during the Sumerian era and now fill museums all over the world. Many still remained buried underground...we all were inheritors of this great treasure of civilization that enriches our present and future and makes modern Iraqi art so fertile. (*The Corpse Washer* 34)

The extract shows how artistic works such as statues and literary writings represent the immortality of culture, which cannot be

deformed and damaged with time. Iraq is rich in its history of arts which is considered a great art workshop by many artists worldwide. The range of the great civilization of a country is measured by its artistic products throughout the ages. These artistic works keep the culture functioning through their rich connotations, which keep the cultural values from being transmitted from one generation to another. Antoon claims that art and literary writings can be critical tools for cultural resistance against colonial ideologies in erasing Iraq's indigenous culture and history.

Antoon quotes the world-famous artist Picasso, "every child is an artist. The challenge is for the artist to stay a child when he grows up!" (*The Corpse Washer* 33). The artistic identity of a child passes through development which may be affected as the child grows. In postcolonial discourse through the novel, Antoon aims to show that the artistic identity of the Iraqi children under the colonial impacts is affected in such a way that it damages the artistic sense in their personalities to reduce the number of cultural heroes such as painters, sculptors, and writers. He also quotes, "art is the lie that represents truth" (*The Corpse Washer* 43), declaring that an artistic product is an imaginative abstract notion that dwells in the artist's mind. As it exists, it represents the truth of the culture that the artist wants to convey. The artists

or writers incarnate the truth of the living condition of human beings through their artistic products.

Antoon portrays Jawad Salim as one of the twentieth century's most significant artistic Iraqi figures to inspire his readers to follow his path. He immortalizes culture through practicing art and glorifying his name for the coming generation for what he had achieved during his life. One of the greatest artistic works still exists in Liberation Square of Baghdad, which carries the name "Liberty Monument." Antoon explores that the monument represents the national spirit of struggle against the dominating imperialistic power. It inspires people to fight against slavery, oppression, colonialism, and poverty. It is also a reality that political demonstrations start in this place. The monument keeps the culture from being affected, and the nationalistic spirit is transmitted from one generation to another to show them who they are.

Antoon displays war as a destructive force attempting to destroy a culture. War gives no chance for the intellectuals to educate the young generation, such as Mr Ismael. Nevertheless, he carries a candle to illuminate the dark road for the new generation. Mr Ismael is forced to join the army, which indicates that the ruling class or the colonial ideology intends to extinguish the cultural flames in the natives

and take the students to the darkness. The protagonist narrates the period after Mr Ismael's absence. He says there was no other teacher to take his place, and all the art classes became vacant until he joined the Fine Arts Academy (*The Corpse Washer* 37). This situation reveals the absurd Iraqi situation aiming to increase artistic ignorance among the young generation.

Antoon, through this novel, attempts to revive the Arabic artistic works such as *Arabian Nights* and Arabic literary tradition, which inspire many literary writers, even Latin American writers. He tries to restore Iraqi artistic history compared to the current absurd situation, which is highly affected by colonial ideologies. He fosters the view that the artist has to embody the shadow of people, not the people themselves. Therefore, his duty concerns the incarnation of his society's cultural and social norms to bridge the gap between generations, inspiring them with his artistic contributions. In the postcolonial context, the artists and writers record the effects of colonialism in their societies. Iraqi society is a good example, as it is depicted through Jawad's attempt to sculpt the victims who are killed as the consequences of the American invasion, "this is how I was when I died and I cannot move" (*The Corpse Washer* 112).

In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist is eager to become a successful sculptor in Iraqi colonial discourse. He is highly influenced by the great Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, whose artistic works are characterized by themes of sadness, isolation, emptiness, and meaninglessness of life. These are suggestive of the postcolonial issues that Jawad and the Iraqi people suffer from. Antoon draws a similarity between Jawad and Giacometti that both witness the consequences of wars, and their effects are carefully characterized in their works.

The novel signifies the importance of art. The author highlights the events of looting and destroying the Iraqi national museum during the American invasion under their vision, "the Americans made no effort to protect public institutions since even occupiers were required to do so by international conventions" (*The Corpse Washer* 70). The Western ideology intends to destroy the artistic heritage of Iraq to create a cultural gap among generations as a way to dominate them easily, leading the colonized people to become psychologically unstable due to the problems in identity.

For instance, one of the American targets in Iraq was the Fine Academy and especially its library, where Jawad studied art. The narrator says, "it was strange to learn that the academy had become a

strategic target..., the Americans hit it with a missile..." (*The Corpse Washer* 70-71). An academy is a place of inspiration for the protagonist as he becomes a successful sculptor. The students' eagerness to clean the campus of the academy attacked by the Americans signifies the people's reaction and efforts to maintain the academy intact. The protagonist feels a pang in his chest when he sees the heaps of ash as the remains of the library books, including works of "Degas, Renoir, Rembrandt, Kandinsky, Miró, Modigliani, and Chagall, de Kooning, Bacon, Monet, and Picasso... Rodin, and Giacometti" (*The Corpse Washer* 72).

Artistic works such as statues carry the cultural connotation that can hold the generations together even if they belong to an aggressive time. However, still represent the historical period of a country. The protagonist says,

I remembered how I saw them years earlier taking down the old monument of the Unknown Soldier, which ...was much more beautiful than the new Unknown Soldier monument. Now, propelled by the illusion of erasing the past and forcibly disfiguring the present, the new Saddams were taking down statues left and right. As if there was a giant axe snatched by each

new regime from its predecessor to continue the destruction and deepen the grave. (*The Corpse Washer* 162)

The passage signifies that the dictator also used art and literature to keep his own culture and history and to be remembered as a glorious legend when he was depicted in heroic epics in a failed assassination. Antoon makes efforts to protect monuments in Iraq throughout the novel. It is a way to revive the Iraqi culture and to keep the Iraqi identity from being scattered. One of them is the Martyr's Monument, which Ismail Fattah al-Turk designed. During the American invasion, the monument transformed into a military base. The military's presence at the monument's site is suggestive of the disruption of cultural communication between the monument and the people. The following extract throws light on the intention of the colonialists.

They are stealing statues these days...They stole Abdilmuhsin al-Sa'doun's statue, melted it, and sold it. Those who don't steal statues pull them down because they want to rewrite history. Ironically, they are imitating their sworn enemy, who himself tried to rewrite history from a Ba'thist perspective, destroying many statues and putting up new ones in

their place. (*The Corpse Washer* 97)

These lines indicate the significance of art and literature in protecting the culture of the country. The colonizer is the same throughout history, trying to erase the history and culture of the colonized country. So, the Americans and their students follow the same strategy to transform Iraqis into ignorant individuals, and no cultural values can hold them together. Therefore, they destroy the statues to destroy the culture, erase the history, and replace it with a new culture per their requirements. As the narrator puts on:

History is a struggle of statues and monuments...I will not have a share in all of this, because I have yet to sculpt anything important...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. (*The Corpse Washer* 97)

American invasion deteriorated the condition in Iraq, and there were many deliberate attempts to erase the country's cultural norms by dissolving the artistic works as Iraq is an unsuitable environment to be an artistic workshop. Nevertheless,

artists and writers such as Sinan Antoon and others challenge all these difficulties holding together the cultural pieces after being fragmented due to Western imperialistic ideology.

CONCLUSION

Sinan Antoon provides a vast space for art in his novel *The Corpse Washer*. His protagonist Jawad is portrayed to be obsessed with sculpturing, which pushes him to give up his ancestral profession. Antoon combines art with literature through his novel to be as one entity. By doing so, he immortalizes the visual art through storytelling to be transformed for the coming generation as a vehicle to convey

the indigenous culture. Antoon gathers all the fragmented cultural pieces using art as a cultural glue. Although he uses the Western version of art, he still believes in the capability of artistic works to restore the indigenous culture of Iraq after being distorted in the presence of the American agencies. These agencies attack all the cultural candles or institutions such as Universities and schools. As well as Antoon explores the Al-Ba'ath regime followed the same strategy to extinguish the cultural flame. Restoring the indigenous culture can illuminate the revolutionary spirit inside the Iraqis to free themselves from Western oppression and marginalization.



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