



MSU Graduate Theses

Fall 2015

Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon

Zahraa Qasim Habeeb

As with any intellectual project, the content and views expressed in this thesis may be considered objectionable by some readers. However, this student-scholar's work has been judged to have academic value by the student's thesis committee members trained in the discipline. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Habeeb, Zahraa Qasim, "Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon" (2015). *MSU Graduate Theses*. 2559.
<https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/2559>

This article or document was made available through BearWorks, the institutional repository of Missouri State University. The work contained in it may be protected by copyright and require permission of the copyright holder for reuse or redistribution.

For more information, please contact BearWorks@library.missouristate.edu.

**WRITING TRAUMA IN IRAQ: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR
AND OPPRESSION IN THE FICTION OF SINAN ANTOON**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Zahraa Qasim Hasan Habeeb

December 2015

Copyright 2015 by Zahraa Qasim Hasan Habeeb

WRITING TRAUMA IN IRAQ: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR AND OPPRESSION IN THE FICTION OF SINAN ANTOON

English

Missouri State University, December 2015

Master of Arts

Zahraa Qasim Hasan Habeeb

ABSTRACT

The Iraqi war narrative reflects the traumatizing situation that omnipresence of war and three decades of oppression have caused to Iraqis' views of life. Writing about their traumatic experience is an essential way of giving voice to their wounds. The Iraqi American novelist Sinan Antoon is a "wounded storyteller" who is able to give words to the wounds of his homeland. His two novels, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* and *The Corpse Washer*, address the physical and psychological trauma of wars and prolonged years of oppression in Iraq. Academic research and literary production about the effect of trauma presented in the Iraqi narrative is fairly limited in comparison to that of both World Wars and the Vietnam War. This project explores the textual representations of traumatic neurosis in these two books. It uses the theoretical lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of trauma, Cathy Caruth's explanation of trauma in literary texts, and the traumatic symptoms proposed by Judith Herman. I propose that Antoon's use of stylistic devices, such as nightmares, fragmentation, and nonlinear narrative reflects the disintegrated lives of the characters. I conclude that trauma has led to the novels' Iraqis' confusing sense of life and death and a strong diasporic urge. The conclusion also suggests that analyzing Antoon's trauma narrative offers an explanation and an insight into Iraqis' pervading sense of alienation, powerlessness, stagnation, and resignation.

KEYWORDS: Sinan Antoon, Iraqi fiction, war trauma, war fiction, war literature, Iraq wars, trauma, trauma fiction, literature

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Dr. Matthew Calihman
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

**WRITING TRAUMA IN IRAQ: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR
AND OPPRESSION IN THE FICTION OF SINAN ANTOON**

By

Zahraa Qasim Hasan Habeeb

A Masters Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts, English

December 2015

Approved:

Matthew Calihman, PhD

Lanya Lamouria, PhD

James S. Baumlin, PhD

Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my gratitude to The Higher Committee for Education Development in Iraq for funding my graduate study. Special thanks and appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Matthew Calihman, whose fascinating fiction class made me discover my passion for fiction. I am indebted for his understanding, patience, and the time he spends in giving me generous, valuable feedback. His support made it possible for me to write about a topic of great interest for me. I owe to him my love for literature conferences. His support enabled me to attend several literary conventions, share my work, and have substantial feedback about it. Undying admiration and thanks to Dr. Lanya Lamouria whose encouragement always inspires me to work harder, and whose feedback helped in expanding and shaping my thesis. I learned from her the value of being encouraging. I give my grateful appreciation and respect to Dr. James Baumlin for his advice and valued input especially on the theoretical aspect of the project. I would also like to send special gratitude to the late Dr. Jane Hoogestraat who was a member of the thesis committee. Finally, I extend my love and thanks to my best friend, Noor Sabah, for her keen interest and constant encouragement and for being a wonderful source of intellectual inspiration.

I dedicate this thesis to my amazing husband for his unwavering love, commitment, support, and encouragement in every academic and personal endeavor in my life. He is the one who cheered me up when I feel discouraged, who endured the most stressful period of completing this thesis by my side, and who always wiped my tears and reminded me of all that we have achieved together, when I make mountains of the tiny obstacles in my way. To my family for all their continual support and genuine prayers that always enlighten my life. They believed in me and encouraged me to strive for my dreams. Finally, to my two angels, Ayat and Larsa, who inspire me to grow and work harder. Huge thanks to all of you for being in my life, I love you, and would not have made it without you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literary Representations of the Iraqi Experience of Tyranny and Wars	7
Life and Literary Work of the Iraqi-American Author Sinan Antoon.....	14
Historicizing Trauma: Meaning, Types, and Symptoms	21
 Trauma Representations in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction	 29
Political Oppression in <i>I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody</i>	29
Prolonged War Trauma in <i>The Corpse Washer</i>	40
 Conclusion	 58
 Works Cited	 59

INTRODUCTION

In a world where wars are increasingly occupying the headlines, it is essential to reveal the traumatic oppression and destruction that lay under the manipulated cover that politicians draw to justify violence. Wars, commonly known as mass producers of death, traumatize humans and greatly affect their views of life. The sufferings of soldiers returning from World War I brought Freud's attention to the long-term effect that facing a catastrophic incident can have on the victims' life. He noticed that the pattern of their illnesses, which he called "traumatic neurosis," resembled that of hysteria. However, traumatic neurosis were more excessive in their "marked signs of subjective ailment [...]" as well as in the evidence it gives of a far more comprehensive general enfeeblement and disturbance of the mental capacities" (Freud 6). In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud explains how a traumatic event experienced by an entire culture can be lost over history but its effect would return once triggered by similar incidents, creating a traumatizing circle. The traumatic effect of wars and oppression can be seen in the preoccupation of popular culture and mass media with violence in all its shapes. The recurrence of wars and oppression is increasingly shaping people's view of the world and consequently the growing need to study trauma. Critic James Berger claims that trauma provides a "method of interpretation" because it makes clear that the effect of a catastrophic event can be revealed in multiple ways that are not directly linked or associated with original event's time or location (572). Analyzing traumatic narratives can be of great value in revealing the cause of social and cultural illnesses that might not be directly linked to any single event.

Trauma is generally defined as “an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11). The original meaning of the Greek word trauma refers to the ‘wound’ or the injury of the body. However, the current use of the word reflects more on the wound of the mind rather than the damage or the harm of the body (Caruth 3). While everyone in life might experience stress due to life pressure, traumatic experiences’ stress is completely different. Patricia Resick explains that traumatic stress usually involves a life-threatening event “accompanied by fear, helplessness, or horror” (28). Freud’s emphasizes that the main cause behind traumatic neurosis is “the factor of surprise, of freight,” which is different from fear and anxiety in that it is accompanied by surprise (6). He relies on dreams to provide an explanation of the mental process involved in facing trauma, arguing that traumatic neurosis’ dreams “have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident,” which creates a traumatizing cycle (7). The occurrence of these dreams perplexes Freud because they do not reflect the patient desire to remember the accident, as he proposes in his “wish-fulfilling tenor of dreams” (7).

Caruth highlights that traumatic experiences are distinguished by the fact that they happen “too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known,” giving too little chance to the consciousness to realize it (4). As a result, the event imposes itself repeatedly later on in the form of nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor as a way to compensate for the missing part of the experience. Thus, the real locus of trauma is not in the catastrophic event itself, but rather in something ambiguous of “unassimilated nature” that has been

missed in the first instance (Caruth 4). The missed (unknown) part of the painful event keeps returning and haunting the survivor in an attempt to make itself known. In her *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman characterizes these repetitions as the “intrusive symptoms” of traumatic neurosis (37). She categorizes traumatic symptoms into three phases that follow each other in appearance: “hyperarousal,” “intrusion,” and “constriction.” The recurring of the incident is the most devastating feature because it can lead to the destruction of the survivor’s life.

Literature has always been a valid source to explore traumatic experience and their effect. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud refers to Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* to manifest the repetition compulsion of traumatic neurosis (16). The hero of this romantic epic, Tancred, unknowingly kills his beloved who is disguised as an enemy knight. Later, Tancred goes to the woods and hit a tree with his sword just to hear the voice of his beloved blaming him for injuring her for the second time. Freud emphasizes the reenactment of the painful event as an example of the repetition compulsion (16). As noted above, the “fright” of encountering a catastrophe leads portion of the event to go inside the mind without being filtered or understood. It stays repressed in the mind and emerges later on as an attempt to make itself known to the victim. Freud explains that “the whole of what is repressed” in the victim’s mind “may be precisely the essential part of it [...], which obliges him “to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience” (12). In literary narrative, these reproductions usually appear in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or any other kind of repetition.

While Freud refers to this romantic epic to illuminate the compulsion to repeat, Caruth is more interested in the “voice” that cries out to tell the story. (Caruth 2-3). The

voice asks audience to bear witness to the truth that the victim himself cannot realize. Caruth claims that the essential point in Freud's writing about trauma does not simply deal with the exact wound of the mind or the body, but rather with the voice that cries out to give words to the traumatic wounds (4). Literary texts that deal with traumatic stories provide readers with two sides of the traumatic event. First, they show what is known about the first encounter with the catastrophe, that is, the actual event that occurred to the victim. Secondly, they demonstrate the missed or unknown part, which manifests itself later in the form of the repetition compulsion. Caruth argues that Freud uses "literature to describe traumatic experience [...] because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersects that the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (3).

Thus, as soon as traumatic experiences are not fully comprehended as they occur, literature provides a good vehicle for exploring trauma. It provides both the actual traumatic incident as well as the delayed traumatic reactions of the victims or their attempt to comprehend what they fail to grasp in the first place. In her analysis of trauma narratives, Caruth traces "insistently recurring words or figures," such as "departure," "falling," "burning," or "awakening" because these figures have the "rhetorical potential and literary resonance" to stand for the forgotten wounds (5). The scope of examining trauma cases covers the range from investigating individual cases of veterans, domestic abuse, and sexual abuse to that of a whole culture or society, such as the trauma of the World Wars, the Holocaust, or the Hiroshima.

Scholars have extensively analyzed trauma in literary texts about World Wars, the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, the 9/11 events. Despite the frequent occurrence of traumatic events of wars and prolonged oppression in the Arab world and the presence of literary works documenting and fictionalizing these events, the amount of literary analysis published to discuss their traumatic effects is considerably limited. In her article “Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabi Jabir,” Dalia Mostafa explores the way in which trauma of the Lebanese civil war keeps haunting and affecting the Lebanese authors’ writing after around two decades since the end of the war. She chooses the work of two authors, Elias Khoury and Rabi Jabir, to investigate three interrelated themes – trauma, identity, and memory. These authors use surrealistic form, detective storylines, fragmentation, and nonlinear narrative to represent trauma in their fiction. Mostafa also discusses the themes of dream versus reality, and alienation as used by the authors to reflect the traumatic effects of civil war. Another example of published literary analysis about witnessing trauma is offered by Ikram Masmoudi, who discusses in her article “Portraits of Iraqi Women: Between Testimony and Fiction” the literary representations of trauma in the novels of four Iraqi female authors living in exile. She explores how these authors’ narratives have the potential to serve as a testimony of the trauma of the whole country. Female characters in these novels have not only witnessed decades of dictatorship, wars, and exile, but also an inevitable form of death – be it the symbolic death of their dreams and ideals or the physical death of their families, friends, and relatives (Masmoudi 59). Each novel brings to light the different ways in which Iraqis are traumatized.

My thesis explores traumatic symptoms in two novels by the Iraqi-American novelist Sinan Antoon – *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* and *The Corpse Washer* – using the theoretical explanation of trauma by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and the clinical symptoms proposed by Judith Herman. Antoon is one of many contemporary Iraqi authors who are asking to be heard to convey the troubled history of the whole country and what Caruth calls the “mute repetition of suffering” (9). He is an example of what Arthur Frank called “the wounded storyteller” who enjoys the distance required to be able to reflect on and to tell of chaos narrative:

The teller of chaos stories is, preeminently, the wounded storyteller, but those who are truly *living* the chaos cannot tell in words. To turn the chaos into a verbal story is to have some reflective grasp of it. The chaos that can be told in story is already taking place at a distance and is being reflected on retrospectively. For a person to gain such a reflective grasp [...], distance is prerequisite. (Frank 98)

People living distressing events are overwhelmed by their situation that makes it hard for them to see a clear picture of what they are suffering. One distance from the chaos is achieved, the victim becomes a valid storyteller who can reflect on the past situation. Frank describes chaos narrative as the one that lacks “narrative order” and whose “plot imagines life never getting better” (97) that no hope of any improvement exists. It is also characterized by “the sense that *no one* is in control” (100) and the “overdetermination” of the victims’ problems: “In the chaos narrative, troubles go all the way down to bottomless depths. What can be told only begins to suggest all that is wrong” (99). All of these features of chaos narrative are true characteristic of Antoon’s texts under examination, as the analysis of novels will propose below.

While both of the novels discussed in the study have been extensively reviewed, there is still no published academic research about them. This thesis is the beginning of a larger project that will show that the prolonged years of wars, tyranny, embargo, and an ongoing civil war have a great impact on defining and shaping the content as well as the formal and stylistic techniques of Iraqi fiction. Fiction has become an essential tool to reveal the destruction of the country and the increasing annihilation of its inhabitants. In many Iraqi novels, surrealistic elements, nonlinearity, fragmentation, and other related techniques are used to narrate and document the unavoidable reality and the traumatic situation that the country has undergone for decades. Antoon employs aspects in form and content, such as fragmentation, nonlinearity, and the use of nightmares to fictionalize the Iraqi traumatic experience. In my discussion of the two novels, I focus on the presence of traumatic symptoms, such as flashbacks and nightmares, helplessness and surrender, inner deadness, distorted views of the present and the future, alienation, disorientation, and the strong diasporic urge. The analysis proposes that traumatic experience caused by the constant presence of wars and the years of dictatorship and oppression have traumatized the novels' characters and significantly shaped their lives, identities, and their relation to the place.

Literary Representations of the Iraqi Experience of Tyranny and Wars

Despite the prevailing political and social upheavals in Iraq's recent history, which constantly shape life in Iraq, literary representations of the Iraqi experience of wars, oppression, and violence are considerably deficient. Roger Luckhurst provides a kind of survey that shows the poor literary coverage of the 2003 Iraq War in comparison

with both the Vietnam War and the 9/11 events. He claims that no major literary text provides a clear picture of the invasion, post-operation period, or the following civil war in a way comparable to those written on 9/11 or the Vietnam War (Luckhurst 713). Other aesthetic media have shown a major reaction to the war, such as photography and documentary films. Despite the severe military restrictions imposed on press photography (715), it became an essential method of reflecting war realities in the aftermath of the invasion. During Saddam Hussein's reign, media, including TV, radio, and press, were highly dominated and controlled by the government. TV broadcast only two national channels that most of the time showed the president's speeches, and activities. Internet access was very limited and expensive and many websites were banned, which made it relatively useless and hard to use. After the fall of Saddam Hussein that brought with it the newly uncensored use of internet and social media, digital images of death and destruction were easier and faster to circulate. One example is the burst of images from the Abu Ghraib prison, which produces an intense response and critical reflection that continue to haunt both American and Iraqi visual artists.

Documentaries have also provided some powerful representations about the Iraq war stories and narratives through their quality and timeliness. Several documentaries in cinema have received major releases through being "structured around the model of a returned veteran suffering posttraumatic stress," but have usually been accused of "poor aesthetics" that lead them to fail in appealing to audiences or gaining their traction. (Luckhurst 716-717). Documentaries are important sources of factual information and are less biased than the mainstream news coverage. Documentary producers can choose to show one side of the story, such as the case with those about veterans returning home. A

group of Iraqi activists living in exile returned from the United States to Iraq three months after the 2003 invasion to produce a documentary entitled *About Baghdad*. The documentary involves conducting interviews with people of all ages and occupations, excluding politicians and American officials, to see their reaction to the war and the change of the situation in Iraq after three months of the US invasion. It shows the people's relief, hope, and fear. Most people did not believe that three decades of tyranny have finally come to an end. Despite being hateful to any kind of occupation, they appear hopeful of rapid change toward democracy and full sovereignty. However, people started to notice the looting, destruction, increasing violence, growing numbers of insurgencies, and the lack of security, leading them to sense an impending chaos and disturbance on all levels if not addressed effectively by the coalition forces (Levine 264). Levine claims that the filmmakers, who are either graduate students or professors of Middle Eastern studies, are truly committed "to achieving both aesthetic and historical accuracy." Rather than filling the documentary with criticism against the US policies in Iraq, they engage in providing complex narrative to reflect the reality on the ground (265).

Poetry is one of the vital literary areas that reveal numerous cultural reflections and critical insight on the war. The problem is that a considerable amount of this poetry goes unknown in the academic world because it is published in informal media and electronic blogs, which are unlikely to be the object of scholars' studies. Electronic writers' blogs are usually ignored by the mainstream literary commentators, which lead them to be considered as an ineffective response to the war (Luckhurst 718). Though this case is applicable for poetry written in English and Arabic alike, it is worth noting that it

is more of an issue in Arab countries where copyrights are not as strict, making writers' blogs and social media the major medium for revolutionary poetry.

However, Luckhurst claims that there is no prose fiction about the Iraq war that has the cultural impact to rival works such as Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* or Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (719). Most books written by American veterans about the Iraqi war exploit the cliché of the returning veteran and the misleading stereotyping of Iraq set ahead by the media. As Luckhurst explains, "American reviewers immediately embraced Kevin Power's *The Yellow Birds* (2012) because his experience as a machine gunner in Mosul in Iraq in 2004–5 was expressed in a finely honed writing-workshop style that suitably transfigured the traumatic details of the tour into polished *aperçus*" (Luckhurst 719-720). One of the essential points to be considered about the Iraqi war is the ambiguity surrounding its purpose, status, and timeline:

Iraq war existed in an odd stage of incompleteness, at once a war, a civil war, and a postwar occupation, an intervention begun as an ostensibly symmetrical engagement between armies that mutated into asymmetrical guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and the classic violent aftermath of colonial withdrawal. The politics of the war remains intensely divisive and, for the American public, the sympathies deeply confused. (Luckhurst 721)

Being multiple things at the same time made the Iraq war a complicated topic. Similarly, in Iraq, people have conflicting views about the invasion, the end of Saddam's reign, the civil war, and the new government. According to Luckhurst, "American soldiers have been portrayed as victims of a merciless military-industrial complex or of a dastardly Arabic resistance, but also simultaneously as ignorant 'grunts' and the perpetrators of uncountable deaths among noncombatant civilians" (721). Luckhurst argues, "the

resistance to narrative or representation of this contemporary war means that cultural narratives about it are often displaced or filtered through the iconography of prior wars,” which might be one of the reasons for the lack of literary coverage of the Iraq war (722).

American veterans’ fiction about the Iraq war can be considered mostly as an attempt to show the hard reality of war that is different from the picture drawn by the media. Many of these authors admit that their writing is a response to the recurrent question about what it feels to be in the battlefield and an effort to tell people about the adversities of being in the war. Most of these literary responses to the Iraq war that have been written in English follow a kind of pattern and perspective that is concerned with the situation of the invading troops in Iraq. Few, however, discuss the situation of the Iraqi citizens’ and Iraqi soldiers’ reaction to the war in their homeland or the effect of being subject to decades of oppression, tyranny, and other wars.

While the returning veterans’ accounts of the of the Iraqi War reflect the reality of the war for the invading forces, literary texts written by Iraqi authors provide a better chance of grasping the real Iraqi experience of trauma. However, only a strong and successful wave of translation can make it possible for these voices to reach the world. The series of wars in Iraq and the surrounding countries in the Arab world rendered writing trauma an essential part of the Iraqi and the Arabic world. Many Arab authors have written prolifically about the Palestine-Israel struggle, the civil war at Lebanon, the great wave of Arabs’ immigration to the US and other countries in Europe, and their later identity struggle. Names like Mahmoud Darwish and Elias Khoury are icons for their literary works on issues of trauma, loss, exile, dispossession, and identity struggle for Palestinians and Lebanese. As noted above, Dalia Mostafa analyzes trauma in three

Arabic novels to show how the traumas and memories of the Lebanese civil war continue to haunt Lebanese writers even after nineteen years since its end (Mostafa 2008). More recently, Arabic literature, especially poetry, has witnessed considerable amount of literary reactions to the series of revolutions known as the Arab Spring. Interestingly, these revolutions took place in countries that have been oppressed for several years with a strict censorship on press and literary works, which makes the newly gained freedom a great opportunity and motivation for writers to respond.

Iraqi authors, who have witnessed a similarly oppressive situation during Saddam Hussein's reign, found with the 2003 invasion a long-desired liberty to write about the reality of life in Iraq. Their writings cover a range of topics, from the different kinds of calamities Iraqis have undergone for around three decades before the 2003 war to the chaos and turmoil that followed it, touching as well on the strong diasporic urge of the people and the identity struggle of those living or returning from exile. For instance, *Between Two Worlds* (2006) is a memoir by Zainab Salbi that discusses the difficult and dangerous situation of being part of Saddam Hussein's government. Zainab and her family lived in the inner circle of Saddam Hussein, which her mother constantly described as living within invisible bars. Zainab is the daughter of Saddam Hussein's personal pilot. Her family had to pretend to love and show affection the whole time while living in the fear of being suspected as traitors. The book shows the tyranny that Hussein inflicted on normal Iraqi citizens and those in his inner circle alike. Even though people who were close to him were considered lucky to be living a luxurious life, they were in fact living with fear. Any act, no matter how innocent, that might show them as not truly

dedicated and loving to the leader, could lead to their fatal end. He was more severe in punishing traitors who were close to him and enjoying his luxury.

One of the novels discussed in the thesis, Sinan Antoon's *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, instead, provides a clear picture of the fate of an average citizen who opposes the government or its leader. Its protagonist is arrested and tortured in prison and will most likely be killed for writing jokes about the leader and the party. Some novels discuss or touch on both the pre and post war Iraq, to show the effect of continuous war and decades of tyranny on the country. Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* covers roughly the period from 1988 to 2006, touching upon the Gulf War, the embargo on Iraq due to the Kuwait War, Iraq 2003 War, and the following civil war.

Other Iraqi authors are inspired by the post-invasion or post-Saddam Iraq. Many people, though opposing occupation, were hopeful that the liberating coalition would bring change and development to the country after three decades of oppression. However, they gradually noticed that chaos and deterioration prevailed, ultimately leading the public to yearn for Saddam days – not exactly for him or his government but for being able to live a semi normal life. This attitude is revealed in both the documentary *About Baghdad* and also in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. The situation is becoming increasingly unbearable with the lack of security, the destruction and looting of the country's heritage, the heightened sectarian tension, and the difficulty to find jobs or make a living. Iraqi authors, especially those living in Iraq, find in fiction a good opportunity to comment and document these trials. Ahmed Saadawi is one of those who experienced Saddam's regime and witnessed the change after the invasion. In his *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), he tells of the chaos, explosions, sectarian killing, and

corruption that happened after the invasion through the story of a man ultimately referred to as Frankenstein. Frankenstein's body is assembled from the limbs of different people who died in an explosion, and he roams the city and takes revenge for all those who constitute his body parts. The creature generally hunts terrorists and corrupted government officials.

Inaam Kachachi is an example of an Iraqi author in exile who chose to discuss Iraqis' divided attitude toward the existence of the US coalition in Iraq. Her novel, *The American Granddaughter* (2011), reflects Iraqi citizens' opinion of Iraqis who have helped and worked with the US army and on the US presence itself. The majority of people who have experienced the oppression of the Ba'ath party and its leader find in the US a liberator that put an end to three decades of tyranny. However, some people consider them occupiers – either because they hate any form of colonialization or because they used to be among government officials who lived in the luxury of being close to Saddam Hussein. Iraq war fiction written by Iraqi authors provides a better picture of the people's lives and a point of view on the war that is different from that presented by non-Iraqi authors.

Life and Literary Work of the Iraqi-American Author Sinan Antoon

Sinan Antoon is a poet, novelist, translator, and a scholar who was born in Iraq in 1967. He grew up in Baghdad during the 70s and 80s to witness Baghdad being changed by the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein to make it a representation of his [Hussein's] murals, monuments, statues, and sayings ("Dead Poets Society" 26). He completed his undergraduate education in English at the University of Baghdad and left

the country to go to the United States after the Gulf War in 1991 ("I think of myself as a global citizen"). Similar to many other immigrants, he left to escape the tyranny and the injustice of Hussein's reign. As he stated in one interview: "In 1991 I left to escape the stifling atmosphere of Saddam. I reached Jordan and drove twenty-five minutes without seeing an image of Saddam. You can't imagine what that felt like" (Levine 263). He seems to have taken upon himself the responsibility of making visible and known all the oppression and sufferings that Iraqis have gone through for decades even though he considers it "agonizingly difficult to write about one's hometown as it drowns in flames and suffocates with smoke ("Dead Poets Society" 25). He started writing poetry since he was a teenager and published some of his work in French magazines in Arabic, but was unable to publish his work in Iraq because the country was geared toward wars and the glorification of the leader ("Rear Window"). However, Antoon admits that growing in an environment where poetry is "like bread" has a significant effect on his passion for writing. Literature, for Antoon, is intermingled and inseparable from his hometown. He associates each of Baghdad's streets, bridges, and even birds with poetry and holds a long admiration for dissident Iraqi poets whose work was banned by the Saddam's government for being revolutionary (Dead Poets Society 27). Iraqi poetry reminds him of his hometown that he was obligated to leave behind: "[a] tear always wells up in my eyes whenever I listen to the traditional Baghdadi *maqamat* we used to sing together—a deep sorrow aged to perfection, echoing Mesopotamia's painful history of floods, famines and the fire of unrequited love" (27). After leaving Iraq, Antoon kept up with the news about Iraq and followed the development of the situation there. Baghdad stayed the object of his worries and concerns: "It is mourning time for me, and Baghdad is now enveloped in

a long, cruel, and starless night. She will wake up once more and will try to forget, as she has done in the past. Meanwhile, I will tend to her scars, ward off future nightmares and shower her with kisses and love from afar” (29). Antoon did his master’s at Georgetown University in 1995 and received a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic studies at Harvard 2006. In his dissertation, "The Poetics of the Obscene," Antoon is the first to study the 10th-century Arab poet Ibn al-Hajjaj. His work includes poetry, fiction, and translations of his own works and other authors’ in both languages. Antoon's poems and essays, in Arabic and English, have been published in *The Nation*, *Middle East Report*, *al-Ahram Weekly*, *Banipal* and the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, among others. He has two collection of poems: *The Baghdad Blues* and *Mawshur Muballal bil-Huroob* (A Prism; Wet with Wars). His poetry was anthologized in *Iraqi Poetry Today*. He is a member of Pen America and a contributing editor to the contemporary Arab literature magazine *Banipal* and the *Middle East Report* journal. Currently, he teaches at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University. Antoon’s work brings to light the multiple types of distress and tries to function as almost an inventory of the people’s lives.

Antoon belongs to the large community of Arab-American writers – one of the many hyphenated groups in the multi-ethnic United States. The literary community of Arab-Americans started as a small group that found in North America an escape from the traumatic situation in the Middle East, including the trauma of prolonged oppressive governments, the Palestine – Israel conflict, the civil war in Lebanon, and wars in Iraq. Those immigrants leave their home countries, traditions, and heritage in search of peace, survival, and wellbeing. Whether they leave willingly or not, they show after a certain

period of time a sense of yearning for the land of their ancestors. This sense of longing is usually mixed with different kinds of feelings and emotions such as being responsible for improving the poor situation in their home countries, being hateful toward the enemy, or even feeling guilty for not being part of the actual dilemma. The internal struggle is intensified by the time they become American citizens in that they start doubting their real self or their real identity and what their duty toward each country is. Many of those immigrants find in writing an escape to express the burden-like feelings and emotions. A brief look at one of the anthologies of Arab-American writers' poetry or fiction shows their defensive or reformatory attitude. They either are defending their Arabic nationality against the widely spread negative stereotyping or are trying to reform the tragic situation there. In his introduction to *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*, Hayan Charara quotes the Libyan-American writer, Khaled Mattawa's declaration that, "If the image of us is truly being created by the American imagination, the time has come to invalidate that image and render it unrecognizable both to ourselves and to the world" (xiii). Additionally, Arab American writings show their concern about the welfare of their countries of origin; they try hard to reveal to the English-speaking world a great deal of the oppression, tyranny, and injustice experienced in their homelands.

Similarly, most of Antoon's work is concerned with the social and political issues in the Middle East, particularly, in Iraq. He aspires to be among those "artists whose work maintains the highest aesthetic standards, but simultaneously has political import and relevance" ("Conversation with Sinan Antoon"). In 2003, Antoon visited Iraq to co-direct, with a group of activists, the documentary *About Baghdad* ("I

think of myself as a global citizen"). Antoon admits that being an Iraqi has colored his "perspective and concerns"; however, Iraq is not the only reason for his commitment to writing about the sufferings of the war ("Conversation with Sinan Antoon"). He believes that "the poet and artist, like any citizen, has a responsibility and cannot afford to be blind and oblivious to the world" ("Conversation with Sinan Antoon"). Though much of Antoon's work is devoted to the sheer representations of the social and political problems in Iraq and its people, his work is also celebrated for its literary aesthetic, poetic language, and creative experimentation with the narration technique. He thinks that "[t]he role of the writer is to write well and to write beautifully, but also to be responsible and write what is relevant to his or her society and the world.[...]. I think of myself as a global citizen; wherever I happen to be I will try to be critical and maintain a distance, a critical distance, but to go back to writing well" ("I think of myself as a Global Citizen").

Antoon's fiction and poetry is a protest or a call for help against the injustice, oppression, and the massive killing that the country has been experiencing for decades. His *The Baghdad Blues* (2007) is a translation of collection of war and love poems that he wrote between 1989 and 2003. The title of the collection reflects Antoon's love to the blues because they resemble a genre of Iraqi music called the *maqam*: "lovely poignant songs about separation, longing and lost love" (I Think of myself as a Global Citizen"). Most of the poems in the collection are assigned location and date of writing, which shows the anti-war poems that Antoon wrote before leaving Iraq, such as "A prism; Wet With Wars," "When I was Torn by War," and "A Prisoner's Song." These poems condemn tyranny, the multiple wars, and the huge amount of death that the country is doomed to witness for many years. The collection also contains poems about the 2003

Iraq war. The majority of the war poems are followed by love poems as if to remind the readers that love is all what is needed to put an end to the devastation, loss, and the sadness caused by wars.

In his novella, *Ya Maryam* (2012), Antoon is specifically concerned with the struggle of Christian Iraqis as a minority group. The book is centered on the lives and the conflicting views of two-generation Christian relatives living in the same house. Through presenting the conflicting views of the two characters, the novel presents “a panoramic view of Iraq, its history, its iconography and its bitter present” (Fahmy). The older male protagonist has lived better times in a nonsectarian Iraq. He refuses to leave the country and thinks of the current situation as a temporary cloud that would leave soon. His younger female relative, on the other hand, has grown in an Iraq that was struggling with sanctions, militias, and a sectarian war, which lead her to lose her sense of nationality and internalize a sectarian Christian identity. She loses her first unborn baby because of an explosion in front of her house, a catastrophe that she can never overcome and which results in ruining her relationship with her husband. She suffers the traumatic experience of being an immigrant in her own country. Her family is forced to either move out of their home, convert to Islam, or pay a large fee to a recently formed group of “Muslim extremists.” She is determined to leave the country because she is convinced that the conflict between Christians and Muslims in Iraq is historical that any hopes of it ending soon are futile. The book ends with documenting the infamous explosion of a church in Baghdad where the two protagonists have planned to meet, leading to the death of the old male relative.

Antoon's two books, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* and *The Corpse Washer* (2013), analyzed in this study, can be perceived as an inventory of the experience of trauma through the way in which each one of them focuses on one or more symptoms associated with traumatic disorder. His imagined prison memoir, *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* reveals the political and ideological oppression that Iraqis experienced for three decades under Hussein's reign. The book was first published in Arabic in Beirut in 2002 and translated to English in 2007. It tells the story of an Iraqi intellectual who has been imprisoned by the Ba'ath regime for privately writing jokes that mock government officials, the Ba'ath ruling party, and Saddam Hussein. His writings made him subject to all kinds of violence and sexual abuse during his period of imprisonment. The prison traumatic experience is a portrayal of what could have happened to any Iraqi arrested or suspected by the Ba'ath regime. The second novel is *The Corpse Washer* (2013) in which Antoon tells the story of Iraqis' struggle with multiple wars, oppression, and a severe civil war that followed the US invasion through the life story of a corpse-washing narrator who is able to see on a daily basis how people are dying. The book is a representation of the destruction in Iraq and the reaction of people to the continuous presence of wars. Analyzing the characters' acts and motives in these two novels reveals the traumatic neurosis that Iraqis experienced as a result of being exposed to prolonged trauma. Each one of these novels fictionalizes the trauma of the country in a distinct way, showing the long and lasting effect of wars and oppression on every aspect of the protagonists' identities and their lives. Fragmentation and nonlinearity are common narrative devices that the author uses in both novels to show the traumatic symptoms proposed by Judith Herman, discussed in the following section. Specifically, they are used to reflect the disintegration, distortion,

alienation, and other characteristics that are generally categorized as the constrictive symptoms of traumatic neurosis. Nightmares are also used in both novels, though they are prevailing in *The Corpse Washer*, to show evidence of the intrusive symptoms of traumatic neurosis.

Historicizing Trauma: Meaning, Types, and Symptoms

The prevalence of violence and war has reshaped physicians and psychiatrists' understanding of physical and mental trauma (Caruth 11). Besides the devastating effects that traumatic experience could cause to the people involved, there is usually a more powerful political reason or a social movement that leads researchers to investigate trauma, its symptoms, and its effects. Traumatic experiences exist in many areas of life, which has led researchers to categorize trauma into different types. Domestic trauma is often experienced by women and children being subject to male dominance through sexual abuse or violence (Herman 79). A childhood trauma is often defined by the sexual or physical abuse experienced by children that has a long lasting effect on their lives as adults. One of the highly researched types of trauma is that caused by wars and political oppression such as the trauma of veterans who return from wars loaded with indelible terrible memories and physical injuries from explosions and other accidents. Powerful political anti-war movements led war trauma to be a more attractive subject to researchers than domestic trauma. While feminist and human rights movements are equally important in making people aware of domestic trauma, most of domestic abuse incidents go unknown under the guise of happy living families, which is highly appealing to the society.

Earliest awareness of prolonged war trauma was brought to public attention during the First World War. Judith Herman, in her *Trauma and Recovery*, provides a chronological explanation of the history of dealing with trauma since World War I. Soldiers suffering from what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were considered traitors and were treated with electric shocks (Herman 21). They had to deal not only with their psychological issues but, more dramatically, with their infamous public images. Fighting in the war, men were “confined and rendered helpless, subjected to the constant threat of annihilation, and forced to witness the mutilation and death of their comrades without any hope of reprieve” (20). They were supposed to show courage and to do their best to defend their countries. The struggle to conceal the “emotional stress of prolonged exposure to violent death” and the increasingly intense war situation led them to start showing what was known as hysteria in men symptoms, such as “mutism, sensory loss, or motor paralysis,” which were treated using electric shocks (20-21).

Freud’s attention to trauma was drawn by a persistent pattern of suffering experienced by people coming back from the First World War. The pattern resembles the illness of those who have gone through life-threatening incidents, which he called “traumatic neurosis” (Freud 6). Pierre Janet (1859-1947), a pioneering psychologist of trauma memory, Freud, and other researchers tried to come up with a set of the possible common symptoms or psychological effects that traumatic experiences can cause to the people involved. The term “Post-traumatic syndrome” (Herman 45) is often used to refer to the mental suffering or “the series of grave physical and motor symptoms” that follows encountering a catastrophic situation or a “shocking incident” (Caruth 16). Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as generally used or defined today, “reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, physically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control” (Caruth 58). The definition of PTSD makes clear that external violence can cause the most damaging effect to the human psyche (58).

Catastrophic events, which by their nature are too much for the mind to take, often occur when the mind is the least prepared to receive or comprehend them, which is why they are never fully explained or completely understood. Freud emphasize that the main cause of traumatic neuroses “seems to rest upon the factor of surprise, of fright” (6). He explains that it is important to note the difference of *fright* from fear and *anxiety*. *Fright* is the state when a person faces danger without being prepared for it, while *anxiety* reflects the expectance of (known or unknown) danger. *Fear*, on the other hand, requires the person to be afraid of a specific object (6). After the actual encounter with the traumatic events, the victims pass through what is known as “latency,” which refers to period void of any symptoms or reactions (Caruth 17). After this period, recognizable responses often appear as an attempt of the mind to understand the event. The incomprehensibility or the missing of the event is the source for all the following symptoms that lead to disturb even the most basic activities of trauma victims.

When experiencing a traumatic event, a breach in the mind occurs as a result of the lack of preparedness to take in the stimulus – the fright or the shock – that occurs too quickly and too unexpectedly (Freud 23-26). The issue is not exactly about the threat that such an experience is causing to the body, but rather the fact that this specific threat is recognized by the mind “one moment too late” (Caruth 62). The absence of the

immediate and direct experience of the trauma becomes the basis for all the nightmares and flashbacks: “[t]he shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of life is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known” (62). Caruth argues that the only way to recognize the “legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” is by acknowledging the “paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival” that exist in every trauma (58). The mind is not capable of confronting the idea of its death directly, which makes survival an “endless testimony to the impossibility of living” (Caruth 62). The overwhelming occurrence of traumatic repetition and nightmares reenacting the event renders survivors’ lives to an “endless inherent necessity of repetition,” which can lead to the ultimate destruction of their lives (63). Modern trauma theory recognizes traumatic experience flashbacks as “retraumatizing; if not life-threatening” to the victims, which explains the high suicide rate of survivors (63). Victims become overwhelmed by intrusive flashbacks and nightmares about their traumatic experience that distract them from performing the normal activities of their lives. They struggle to forget the traumatic experience, move forward, and try to adjust to their surroundings while living in a traumatizing world of their own.

Traumatic symptoms are divided into three main categories that follow each other in the order of appearance – hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction (Herman 35). Hyperarousal describes a state in which victims perceive threat to exist everywhere, leading them to live in a “persistent expectation of danger” (35). The lack of safety initiates a number of other symptoms that demonstrate the victims’ stressed situation, such as startling easily, reacting irritably to small provocations, and sleeping poorly (35).

Veterans who fought during the First World War showed a variety of other traumatic signs, including “hyperalertness, vigilance for the return of danger, nightmares, [and] psychosomatic complaints” (35-36). These symptoms are powerful enough to withdraw the victims from their regular life activities, leading them to live in a circle where they are trying to disguise and suppress their anxiety and suffering to cope with the surrounding environment that expects them to be normal.

The second phase in traumatic experience is referred to as “intrusion,” which reflects the victims’ inability to delete the image of the catastrophe from their mind. They continue reliving the traumatic event, repeatedly interrupting the normal pace of their lives and forming a series of intrusions that Freud called “repetition compulsion” (Herman 41). Herman explains that “[t]he traumatic moment become encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during the waking state and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). Flashbacks and nightmares impose themselves in the victims’ lives despite all their effort to forget the catastrophic event itself or anything that might trigger remembering it. As Freud argues, intrusive dreams that occur after encountering a catastrophic situation constantly traumatize the victim: “dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (7). He describes these repetitions as the only way through which repressed materials from the traumatic experience communicate themselves to the victim (Freud 12). Traumatized people do not simply remember the painful event, but rather continue reliving it, which leads them to become repeatedly traumatized by the same horrific event. The repetition compulsion is one of

the most recognizable symptom of traumatic experience. It reflects the human mind's attempt to understand or comprehend the missed experience. Intrusive symptoms, just like hyperarousal, affect the victims' abilities to live normally and prevent their endeavor to move forward with their lives. These symptoms act as constant reminders that bring with them all the emotional distress associated with the catastrophic event.

The third set of symptoms form the "Constrictive" state (also called dissociative state), which indicates the complete surrender that the victims go through when they become utterly powerless and realize that any form or shape of resistance or self-defense is futile (Herman 42). Herman compares the helpless traumatic victims to animals who "freeze" upon being attacked by a powerful predator; however, in the case of humans constantly defeated, it is mostly associated with the consciousness than actions: "These alterations of consciousness are at the heart of constriction or numbing [...]. Sometimes situations of inescapable danger may evoke not only terror and rage but also, paradoxically, a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve (42). This set of symptoms explains all the resulting alienation, inner deadness, and the lack of balance of the victims whose life events become "disconnected from their ordinary meanings [...] and [...] lose its quality of ordinary reality" (43). The combination of "indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity" generates a lack of initiatives for future personal improvement in traumatized people and leads them to lose faith and their bonds with friends and family. These essential changes in the victims' way of living are the main reason behind traumatized people's failure to cope with and succeed in life, causing the large numbers of suicide attempts that follows facing trauma. While "altered state of consciousness" destroy the meaning of the victims' life, they

might be considered as “one of nature’s small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain (Herman 43). The constrictive symptoms show the long-term effects of traumatic experience on the quality of life.

In literary narratives of trauma, repeated flashbacks, recurring nightmares, and repetition in general are among the key devices of representing trauma – especially its early stages – hyperarousal and intrusion. The repetition of individual words and phrases, which eventually lead them to acquire new meanings and significant, also contributes to the fragmentation and nonlinearity of the narrative that serve to reflect the damaging effect of trauma. Two of Sinan Antoon’s novels are employed in this study to explore the literary representations of the Iraqi traumatic experience of three decades of wars and oppression. *I’jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* provides a typical example of the hyperarousal and intrusion phases of trauma. Its protagonist, Furat, is arrested by the Ba’ath Party for writing jokes and mocking poetry about the leader. Furat is traumatized from the first minute of his arrest because, just like any other Iraqi during Saddam Hussein’s reign, he knows exactly that being a suspect subjects him to violent interrogations, sexual abuse, extended period of imprisonment, or perhaps even death. While in prison, he starts writing a manuscript without the diacritical marks. Antoon uses Furat’s writings to show the agitated mind of a person traumatized not only while in captivity, but also outside the prison by the invisible confinement of the Ba’ath Party apparatus. As the manuscript shows, Furat keeps speculating the different kinds of torture that he is going to experience and keeps suspecting that everyone would harm him. The sentence “I awoke to find myself (t)here” is repeated several times throughout the book, almost rendering the whole novel as several nightmares about the multiple kinds of oppression and torture

practiced by the tyrannical government against its people. Trauma is also manifested through the use of nonlinear narrative that reflects Furat's distorted and traumatized state of mind.

In the second novel discussed in this project, Antoon use his corpse-washer protagonist to show how living through the prolonged war and oppression trauma has altered people's view of living and merged the boundaries between their perception of life and death. *The Corpse Washer's* protagonist, Jawad, is traumatized by his constant contact with dead bodies that are growing dramatically in number. The overwhelming presence of death is increasingly shaping the face of life in the whole country. Jawad's almost daily intrusive nightmares depicting death and violence reflect the type and magnitude of death in the real Iraq. Along with his family and acquaintance, Jawad reveals how trauma rendered people stagnant and powerless. They offer a typical example of how hopeless people are of any change because of the increasing deterioration and diasporic urge.

TRAUMA REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY IRAQI FICTION

Political Oppression in *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*

Sinan Antoon's *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* is a fictional memoir about Furat, a dissident college student and a poet, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Furat is arrested by the Ba'ath ruling party for writing and telling jokes that make fun and criticize the party, and even more importantly, Saddam Hussein. He has a distinct way of hiding or camouflaging his "illegal" writings through omitting the diacritical marks of specific letters. Furat also changes some of the words in the party's slogans or the leader's speeches to create a sarcastic context. The actual text of the novel contains some examples, such as, "The Ministry of Rupture and Inflammation," where the footnote indicates that this might actually refer to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Information (*I'jaam* 3) and he uses "National Hemorrhage" to refer to the National Heritage (54). The translator of the novel has attempted to provide some examples for the English version, but satire along with many forms of humor has a hard time being translated into other languages. Thus, the Arabic original contains many more of these sarcastic comments. The book opens with a directive order from the Ministry of Interior asking for someone to fill in the necessary diacritical marks of a manuscript that was found in a prison cell in Baghdad's Directorate of General Security in 1989. An Arabic text written without dots can be fairly ambiguous.

As explained in a prefatory note to the novel by the author himself, the Arabic alphabet contains pairs or triplets of letters that have the same skeleton, but are pronounced differently because of the number of diacritical marks on each – one, two, or

three. For example, if the word *bayt* (house) is written without dots, it can mean *bint* (girl), *banat* (she built), *nabat* (plant), or *thabt* (brave), with a variation of the number and place of the dots. Therefore, changing or omitting the dots altogether would result in a loss or a significant ambiguity and confusion in meaning, even though the context might help identify some of the words. *I'jaam*, which is the resulting dotted manuscript, is a series of disconnected thoughts and incidents narrated in the first person technique by the protagonist himself. While the book is centered on Furat's arrest and his life in the prison, it also provides accounts of his life with his grandmother after the death of his parents in a car accident, his school life, his love relationship with his classmate Areej, and his life as a Christian in the Muslim majority Iraq. The narrative reveals a great deal of the desperate life of the people and the oppression and tyranny practiced by the Ba'ath party and the government during Saddam Hussein's reign. Party members censor every detail of the people's lives, making it obligatory to show love and support for the party and its leader. Any mistake, no matter how innocent, or unintentional, would take any citizen into the government's mysterious prisons that no one can escape.

The novel offers a typical example of what Judith Herman calls "prolonged trauma" or a trauma repeated for an extended period of time. The term best describes situations of captivity, such as prisons, concentration camps, slave labor camps, religious cults, brothels, institutions of organized sexual exploitation, and even oppressive family relationships (Herman 74). Political captivity is one type of prolonged trauma that Iraqis have experienced for many years during Saddam Hussein's three decades of reign. The first-person-narrator protagonist, Furat, provides a glimpse of the oppression and violence that the government and the ruling Ba'ath party were using against the people. Party

members spying and reporting against people are everywhere – schools, colleges, directorates, and even in homes. Furat tells of a classmate in college who was a security officer working as a spy for the party, pretending to be a student: “Like most of his colleague, Abu Umar never made any effort to conceal his occupation. He rarely attended classes, and his age (he was in his late thirties) was a clear sign that he wasn’t an ordinary college students” (*I’jaam* 2). The Ba’ath party and its leaders try hard to convince the people that everyone is their enemy, regardless of who they are. Anyone could be a traitor, even a spouse, a parent, or a sibling. People are traumatized by the fear of being suspected of opposing the government. They constantly hear of the different kinds of torture and the violent interrogations that people who are accused of “disloyalty” receive in prisons. On one occasion, Furat’s grandmother, who frequently warned him to stop poking fun at the government and the party, reminded him of the story of the child who, through his innocence, led his father to be put in prison. She told Furat, “Don’t you remember the story about the child who told a joke he’s heard at home, and how his kindergarten teacher wrote a report and had the child’s father put in prison? That was in kindergarten. Just imagine how many like her they have in colleges” (10). Disguised party members lurk in every neighborhood and institute to trap people in reward of receive a promotion or a badge.

The main task on the agenda of Ba’ath Party is to create a society that sees the leader as a god-like figure that should be idolized and obeyed without questioning. Herman explains this form of “captivity,” in which the perpetrator is rendered the most powerful person who shapes the actions and the beliefs of the victims’ psychology:

The perpetrator’s first goal appears to be the enslavement of his victim, and he accomplishes this goal by exercising despotic control over every

aspect of the victim's life. But simple compliance rarely satisfies him; he appears to have a psychological need to justify his crimes, and for this he needs the victim's affirmation. Thus, he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of respect, gratitude, or even love. His ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim. (Herman 75)

People are obliged by the party members to show gratitude to their alleged benefactor.

The necessary party activities, meetings, and celebrations of its events are of high priority to members. School lectures are constantly interrupted so that all students go to the schoolyard to listen to the party members giving a speech about a victory in the battlefield or a decision made by the leader. Most, if not all, professors at universities have to be party members and some of them are not professional enough but have obtained the job easily by proving themselves to be exclusively dedicated to the party and the leader. Students are obligated by the party to go in demonstrations to show their love and allegiance to Saddam Hussein. Furat discusses at length the way in which, "The Party mobilized all its branches to organize the public 'spontaneous' demonstration of their love for the leader.... They warned us that anyone caught trying to leave the assembly would be severely punished and expelled from school" (*I'jaam* 23). A very large number of books and authors are banned because they show the revolutionary spirit that citizens should not be exposed to, such as Muzaffar al-Nawwab and Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri. Furat tries in vain to have access to George Orwell's *1984* or convince one of his professors to write a research paper about the book. The party puts all efforts into installing Hussein as a god-like figure in the people's mind. His posters and murals are seen in every place, whether public or private. Synopsis and selections of his speeches are written on textbooks and even taught at schools. At home, families know the untold rule

that the leader's picture should be hung on the walls or the front door and that not adhering to the rule might lead to the family being suspected traitors.

The party has definitely succeeded in rendering the people to either willing victims or absolutely submissive and helpless rebels. They follow the Stalinist strategies in creating a totalitarian regime that Orwell explains in his *1984*:

We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. [...]. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us; so long as he resist as we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and all illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. (255)

A tyrannical government does not simply abolish its dissidents, but rather aims to transform their attitude. People start seeing Saddam Hussein as the icon of a perfect leader and favor him over their own families. Furat tells of a man whose award ceremony is broadcasted on national television for killing his own son “for refusing to return to his military unit [...]. His heroism was used to embolden the spirit of victory and to establish the icon of a new citizen – one who puts country before all else, even his own blood” (*I'jaam* 35). Party members even oblige families of soldiers who die at the battlefield to celebrate their sons' death with music instead of mourning, claiming that the family should be proud and happy that their son is a martyr who died while defending his country from its enemy. The vast majority of the people are party members, willingly or not. Furat mentions how his not joining the party would prevent him from being admitted to graduate studies: “I remained independent even after it was threatened that I wouldn't be accepted into a Master's program if I didn't join” (42). As it appears from the details of Furat's life, which is a typical life of any Iraqi citizen, party members and government

policies control every aspect of the people's lives. They are obligated to show allegiance regardless of their real attitude and are oppressed with the fear of being accused of betrayal and disloyalty.

This situation of invisible confinement makes those who do not support the party and its policies less resistant, inactive, and simply helpless. They represent the slice of the society who suffers the real trauma of captivity. Herman emphasizes that psychological trauma is "an affliction of the powerless."

Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (Herman 33)

The shock from facing the stressful event devastates the human mind's ability to cope with the catastrophe. Furat's grandmother and many of his friends warn him against aggravating the government because once he is suspected and arrested, there is nothing that he can do to escape from their rage. After accompanying security officers who meet him at the campus, Furat starts to remember his grandmother's words: "Please be careful, my son. For my sake. What would I do if anything happened to you? I'd die. They'll cut out your tongue. These people don't fear God. They fear nothing..." (*I'jaam* 4). He realizes his dangerous situation, saying "The drops of sweat began to multiply on my forehead and my heart beat with a tribe of drums running one after another" (5). The fear of what is coming is so intense for Furat because of all the stories he heard about the extreme cruelty and violent tactics that General Security uses with the suspects. However, he is fully aware that his arrest means the inevitability to experience these terrible stories

and that he is absolutely helpless to change the situation. Inside the prison, he is powerless and can never escape from the violence or the repeated sexual abuse. He sits in his dirty cell waiting for unknown.

The novel's stylistic techniques also give expression to trauma. Through using a series of disconnected thoughts and incidents related in first person narrative, *I'jaam* represents trauma that is still within its first two phases – hyperarousal and intrusion. The narrative starts with a classified directive report from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior about a manuscript that was found in a prison cell and ends with an addendum stating that the manuscript, after being transcribed with diacritical marks, seems to be “a record of the unrelated thoughts and illogical recollections of a prisoner” (*I'jaam* 97). The body of the narrative that comes between the first directive order and the addendum on the last page is the dotted manuscript, the result of the officer's work to make the text intelligible. The first person narrative makes it clear that Furat is the author of the manuscript. However, it is fairly difficult to know the time and location from which Furat is writing the manuscript or to tell whether specific parts of the narrative are flashbacks of real incidents or just nightmares. Fragmentation, repetition of certain phrases, and nonlinearity of the text are among the main aspects that lead to this confusion, which is necessary to show the disturbing effects of trauma.

Nonlinear narrative is one of Antoon's favorite techniques to show the traumatic effect of the eternal war and oppression that Iraqis have experienced for decades. He is a wounded storyteller giving words to Iraqis' chaos stories that he witnesses for several years. As Frank Arthur notes, “Stories are chaotic in their absence of narrative order” (97). The novel features a stream of nonlinear thoughts and past incidents that shifts back

and forth from Furat's college life to his grandmother, to the government and the Ba'ath, to the prison, and to his relationship with Areej. In one interview, Antoon describes non-chronological narrative as "a political and philosophical choice" used to disturb the "hegemonic discourse" of the tyrannical apparatus:

The only way to disrupt is to write in an interpretive way. [...] Additionally, a tortured and traumatized prisoner cannot always think and remember in a linear fashion. He is writing to maintain his sanity and is not necessarily always thinking of an audience. So he is expressing himself spontaneously in nightmares and scattered memories. ("I think of myself as a global citizen")

Writing is Furat's only available tool to express his opposition to the government and his oppressed situation; therefore, it is unlikely to result in a logical, linear text.

At the very beginning of the narrative, Furat, the author of the manuscript, is arrested because one of the Ba'ath party members, who is spying as a regular college student discovers that Furat writes mocking poetry and jokes against the party and its leader. One of the two comrades who took Furat to the General Security hit him on the back of his head, causing him to faint: "I reached up again to stop him, and felt a fierce blow at the back of my head. I don't remember what happened afterward" (*I'jaam* 6). After this sentence, the narrative jumps to tell of Furat's nightmare about the government asking people to donate their eyes. He goes to the street and sees a long line of people waiting to make the donation, including one of his school friends, Ali. The nightmare ends with "I awoke to find myself (t)here. Paper were scattered in front of me. Ali! Where are you? Did you visit me in my nightmare to encourage me to write" (6). Admitting that he does not know what happened after fainting and starting his prison narrative with a nightmare set the possibility that other incidents in the text are not real

too. Furthermore, the same sentence, “I awoke to find myself (t)here,” continuously interrupts the narrative throughout the rest of the book, leading the reader to suspect that the previous paragraph is a dream. These factors unite the real and the imaginative narrative, making it hard to decide whether specific parts of the story are flashbacks of incidents that had happened to the protagonist or they are just nightmares and hallucinations. Caruth observes that the recurring dreams in traumatic neurosis can only be explained as “the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way. In trauma, that is, the outside has gone inside without any mediation (59). The use of dreams contributes to the fragmentation of the text because dreams are characterized by the lack of defined beginnings or endings. In contemporary Iraqi fiction, fragmentation exists on multiple levels—the levels of language and plot, in particular—to show the difficulty of having a direct and coherent narrative where peoples’ lives are disintegrated, confused, and disillusioned. Their everyday lives are defined by fear, nightmares, oppression, and alienation, making it impossible to any form of organization or logic to exist.

The way in which *(t)here* is written in the text further complicates the point – it can mean *there*, which leads the reader to conclude that Furat is no longer in prison, or it could mean *here* to indicate that he is writing from his cell. While in prison, a young guard named Ahmed gives Furat a bunch of white paper and encourages him to write. However, Furat is afraid to do so at the beginning because of the high possibility that Ahmed is a party member pretending to be a friend to trap Furat. This attitude reflects the “persistent expectation of danger,” which Herman called “hyperarousal” and which represents the first phase of symptoms after facing trauma (35). Throughout the novel,

Furat keeps thinking about whether it is safe to write or not several times and ends up choosing to write without the diacritical marks to make his text hard to understand. He settles that even if his writings are to be found, they would not understand his handwriting and would definitely think that he has gone mad.

The majority of the narration features Furat telling of thoughts and incidents to no particular interlocutor in the past tense, making it likely that he is telling his story from outside the prison. There is also an occasional presence of the pronoun *you* when he tells of his memories of his girlfriend Areej: “That day you were standing alone. An island of silence amidst a sea of slogans, you paid no attention to this circus, and read a magazine. I know you from French classes” (*I’jaam* 44). Areej’s presence as an interlocutor leads the reader to suspect that Furat is at some point out of prison telling the whole story to her. However, this possibility is easily refuted with a close look at the end of the novel. The end marks Ahmed coming to tell Furat that he is no longer a prisoner because a revolution has taken place and led the leader to flee to Libya asking for an asylum and that now Furat is free.

After taking a shower in the prison, Furat goes out in the completely abandoned streets and sees the mutilated murals of the leader. Such a revolution reflects an end that Furat and many other people wanted for a long time:

I smiled and breathed deeply. How many times had I dreamed of a day like today? ... Written on the walls were ‘Revolt, Revolt Baghdad’ and ‘If the people choose life, fate will succumb’” (*I’jaam* 94).... I began to feel tired, and the pain in my lower back returned. I sat on a bench at the bus stop, thinking of what I would do (t)here. This is my last sheet of paper. When will Ahmed come again? I’ll ask him for more. Yes, I want to write more. Maybe I can ask him to call my grandmother and Areej to tell them that I’m (t)here. They’ll shut off the lights soon. Where are you, Ahmed? (96)

Reading the closing paragraphs gives the impression that a real revolution has happened and Furat is actually out in the streets looking for a way to reach home. However, the ending lines dismiss that possibility in favor of the revolution being another nightmare that Furat has while still in the Prison. He is still looking for Ahmed inside the prison to bring him more papers to write. He also wants Ahmed to call Areej to let her know that Furat is still *(t)here*, in the same location where the novel starts, inside the prison cell. The revolution is simply the imaginary end that everyone is dreaming of to escape the oppression of the party and the tyranny of its leader. The merging of *here* and *there* and juxtaposing real incidents with fantasy incidents in the narrative is a way to represent the prolonged trauma. Furat is continually traumatized by the party both outside the prison by their invisible bars and inside the prison by their violent interrogations and sexual abuse.

The readers' inability to decide the location from which Furat is telling the story connects back to the ambiguity of Furat's fate. Antoon intends this confusion to make Furat's story and fate a representation of all "those [prisoners] who never returned" for whom he dedicates the novel:

"One of the ideas of the novel is the impossibility of fully knowing what became of the victims and of their thought and memories. We can never fully recover what was lost through them. We can never come to terms, fully, with their plight and suffering. Something is forever lost and we will never know! ("I think of myself as a global citizen")

Jawad's prolonged prison trauma resembles the traumatic situation of the whole country. Iraqis have been through a prolonged series of different kinds of inflictions: embargo, tyrannical oppression, and wars that lasted for several years. What is special about the Iraqi experience of trauma is that, until now, there does not seem to be any signs of a recovery or at least any of the prerequisites necessary to attain the recovery, which

usually starts, as Herman argues, with “safety” (155). Under the reign of Saddam Hussein, Iraqis have undergone different kinds of violence and oppression that ends with the invasion to be followed by chaos and an ongoing civil war. Iraqis are traumatized by their past, their present, and the repeated trauma that is constantly and overwhelmingly shaping their lives.

Prolonged War Trauma in *The Corpse Washer*

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. Then I wrap them carefully in white so they may reach their final reader – the grave. (3)

The Corpse Washer is a translation of *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* [The Pomegranate Alone], which was published in Arabic in 2010. The book tells the story of a young man named Jawad who belongs to a family whose ancestral profession is corpse-washing. He initially resists the idea of pursuing the job in the hope of becoming a professional artist. Corpse washing is an intricate, essential ritual in Islam that, briefly, refers to the immediate washing of the dead body three times, using water, while repeating, “In the name of God, most Merciful, most Compassionate. Your Forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness” (19). The religious idea behind the corpse-washing ritual is that God creates humans in the perfect image and that, for this reason, the body should be clean before meeting its maker (“In Civilian Snapshot”). After that, the body is shrouded using a large piece of white cloth and is put into a coffin with a branch of the pomegranate tree on each side of the dead (20). This specific plant is put in the coffin or ultimately the grave because it is believed to be sacred, according to what is mentioned

in the Quran, and thus can help soothe the journey of the dead (“In Civilian Snapshot”).

In the garden outside of the novel’s *mghaysil* (the place where they wash corpses) grows a pomegranate tree that is watered by runoff from corpse washing. Over the course of the novel, this tree takes on the symbolic representation of death and that explains the origin of the Arabic name of the book.

Jawad’s father is a person “heavily armed with faith” who thinks, just like his ancestors, that God will reward him for performing this ritual (*Corpse Washer* 3). Unlike his father, Jawad is not a pious or a practicing Muslim and he does not believe that this job is sacred. He wants to become a sculptor who can represent and immortalize life through realistic art, instead of washing corpses in preparation for their religious burial. In order to achieve this childhood dream, he obtains his undergraduate degree from the Academy of Fine Arts - Baghdad. However, he does not have any promising opportunities to work in sculpture due to the restless political situation in Iraq, which led many of its intellectuals and artists to leave the country and those who remain are discouraged from writing or making art. Jawad’s unwillingness to inherit the corpse-washing profession of his ancestors has always troubled his relationship with his father. He preferred to work as a house painter during his summer breaks from school instead of joining his father at the *mghaysil*. However, Jawad is obligated to pursue his ancestral job to support his mother after his father’s death and especially after his mother’s sickness, which increases his need for money. For him, this job is merely the place in which death is like a monster that is getting stronger every day, seizing more people’s lives and filling Jawad’s life with dead bodies. Even corpse washing is different than it was when his

father used to do it because death used to be “timid and more measured,” while in Jawad’s days, corpses are “tenfold” (*Corpse Washer* 3).

Jawad’s work is Antoon’s means of making visible the sheer quantity of death in Iraq and the many ways in which people are losing their lives. The non-chronological style in which the book is written makes it relatively hard to determine the specific dates of the story’s beginning and end; it covers roughly the period from the early 1980s to around 2006. The events that are most essential to this period are the series of wars that the country has experienced and their damaging effects. The first of these is the Iran-Iraq war (the first Persian Gulf War), which started in 1981 and lasted for eight years. The second, beginning in 1991, is the Iraq-Kuwait war or the Gulf War, which ended with the United Nations imposing comprehensive economic sanctions on Iraq. The last is the 2003 invasion, a war that put an end to the era of oppression and tyranny only to be followed by the ongoing civil war and insurgency. These wars and the three decades of oppression and tyranny by Saddam Hussein and his ruling Ba’ath party have traumatized Iraqis and shaped the people’s way of living and thinking.

The Corpse Washer, like *I’jaam*, is a representation of trauma. Indeed, I would argue that the act of reading *The Corpse Washer* is much like the experience of trauma. The book starts with Jawad’s dilemma of having to wash the corpse of his girlfriend, Reem, who is laying naked and looks alive to him. Before he can wash her, a group of men comes and slaughters him and he sees his own head rolling in front of him: “I feel a sharp pain, then the clod 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” (*Corpse Washer* 2). The use

of the first person narrative technique bewilders the reader about the identity of the speaker who is able to tell of his own death. Only near the end of the chapter, that the reader discovers that the whole incident is just a nightmare: “I wake up panting and sweating.... The same nightmare had been recurring for weeks, with minor changes.... Death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep” (2-3). The reader is not prepared to receive such an incomprehensible and indelible experience of horror very early in the narrative. Throughout the rest of the book, many similar horrific nightmares occur, which serve as further examples of the intrusion phase of the traumatic experience that shocked the reader at the onset of the novel. Of the novel’s forty-five chapters, twelve are nightmare-chapters depicting death. They represent the reliving of the traumatic event that was not totally comprehended in the first place.

The first time the narrator’s name is introduced is in a nightmare about “an old man with long white hair and a long white beard” who asks Jawad to write on a piece of paper the names of the souls that old man will “pluck,” leaving the bodies for Jawad to wash and purify (*Corpse Washer* 27). Even though the author does not state directly who the old man is, he is likely a representation of the angel of death or what the Muslim culture calls Azrael. Likewise, many other nightmare-chapters deal with a variety of scenarios, such as Jawad dying by an explosion or militia killing, Reem dying of breast cancer, or the increasing number of dead people coming to the *mghaysil*. These nightmares depicting death can also be the symptoms of Jawad’s traumatic experience of his first encounter with death. Around the age of fifteen, his father allowed him to come to the *mghaysil* to witness the process so that Jawad would be prepared to inherit the

profession. The experience was so shocking to Jawad that he does not seem to have ever come to terms with accepting the idea:

I was astonished by father's ability to return to the normal rhythm of life so easily each time after he washed as if nothing had happened. ... I imagined that death followed me home. 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. When we had dinner that night I watched Father's fingers cut the bread and put food in his mouth. It was hard to believe that these were the same fingers that had rubbed a dead body only a few hours before. ... The dead man's face kept gazing at me that night, but he had no eyes, just hollow sockets. I didn't dare to tell Mother or Father about the nightmare I kept having that entire summer. (22)

The gravity of the scene and the easiness with which his father practiced the profession were too much for Jawad to handle at one time. The recurring nightmares that followed his first day at the *Mghaysil* represent his mind's attempt to comprehend the traumatic encounter that Jawad never fully grasped in the first place.

Chapters depicting what Jawad calls "nightmare[s] of wakefulness" are distinct in that they start as a common narrative in the waking world, and it is only near their end that the readers discover that the preceding narratives are just nightmares; they are almost indistinguishable from the real world (131). In one instance, Jawad has a dream of standing in a long line to get a passport after being on the banned list for many years because the Ba'ath party has discovered his uncle is a communist (159). A suicide bomber joins the line and causes a huge explosion. People's bodies are "scattered" and Jawad's face is covered with blood, but he is "astonished" that his body is still intact: "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" (159). As critic Grant Barber explains, with such a nightmare, Jawad leaves the reader with "dream and reality, the mundane and the surreal"

that are simply blurred. In another nightmare, he sees his father in the *mghaysil*, but it is completely dark and they have to use candles because, as his father informs him, they are in the underworld. The place is filled with corpses and body parts that need to be washed and shrouded. Jawad asks his father if they are alive or dead, but he does not answer. Then, Jawad wakes up and sees the candle near his bed “choking and about to give out” (*Corpse Washer* 166). Jawad himself is not certain if he is awake or in a nightmare because of the sheer similarity between the real world and the underworld in his dream. Likewise, the kind and magnitude of death depicted in other nightmares foreshadows and alludes to death in the real world, which makes them undistinguishable from reality. They take the readers to the bewildering world of trauma.

The several nightmares in *The Corpse Washer* urge the reader to piece together the apparently unrelated contents of these nightmares to see that they provide a portrait of an unbearable and unavoidable reality. Repeated flashbacks, recurring nightmares, and repetition in general are among the key devices of representing trauma, especially in its early stages: hyperarousal and intrusion. In literary narratives of trauma, repetitions are manifested through the reoccurrence of certain words and phrases that would gradually acquire new meanings and significance. Repetition also contributes to the fragmentation and nonlinearity of the novel. Jawad’s narrative constantly shifts between present and past events, referring to many incidents from the 1980s to around 2006. In the first nightmare-chapter, he is an adult working as a corpse washer after his father’s death in 2003. In the next chapter, the narration shifts back to the early 1980s, in which Jawad accompanies his mother to his father’s work place – the *mghaysil*. Pages later, the narrator jumps ahead to 1988 to provide a detailed account of the death of Ameer,

Jawad's eldest brother, in the al-Faw battles of the Iran-Iraq war. Death, which is usually present in Jawad's family, is "about to declare its presence once again, but with a cruelty and force that would tattoo itself" on the heart of Jawad's father, who "wept like a child" after losing his favorite son (11). The reader is taken to another world to witness the typical tragic reaction that many families have experienced as wars take their sons' lives and return only their corpses. Some families are just informed that their sons are missing and that they might be lost forever. In such situations, families spend years longing to receive the dead body instead of living in the torture of hoping the son is still alive. The sheer possibility of being alive adds to the people's confused and complicated concept of life. Then, the non-chronological narration returns again to Jawad's childhood to provide a meticulous description of the corpse-washing profession, his school and college years, and his meeting with his widowed girlfriend, Reem. In all these events, the brother is supposedly alive. After some chapters that focus on Jawad's youth, the reader is again taken back to the time after the invasion, when the brother, the father, and many other characters either have died or disappeared. In the course of reading the novel, then, one has to stop for a while to recall whether or not a specific character is supposed to be alive or dead, and to think whether some of the characters who disappeared from the novel will come back. In other words, characters seem to die but come back to life again because they are mentioned in the narrative along with those who are alive.

Prolonged presence of trauma leads to confusing view of life and death. People who experience catastrophic, near death incidents suffer from the shock of their encounters with death and the incomprehensible fact of their survival. Those who witness the deaths of other people lose the moment of their acquaintance with the actual death.

What remains stored in the mind is the shock of their encounter with the tragedy and the mystery of managing to leave physically unharmed. The prevailing, constant presence of death and the uncertainty of the lives of friends and acquaintance lead people to identify with those who are dead more than with those who are alive and create a life-death confusion. Many characters in the novel simply disappear from the scenes, causing others to be unsure of whether they are dead or still alive. One example is that of Hammoudy, a young orphan who is obligated to leave school at 10th grade to support his mother through working with Jawad's father. Hammoudy gradually comes to be skilled in corpse washing that after the death of Jawad's father, he starts working in the *mghaysil* alone. As Jawad abhors being in the *mghaysil*, he is completely satisfied to give the whole place, which belongs to his father, to Hammoudy in return for a small monthly payment. One day, Hammoudy goes to the Shorja local market, as he usually does, to bring the supplies needed in corpse washing, but he never returns home. His family members and Jawad search for him in many places, but to no use. They never know if he is dead or alive, or whether he has been killed, robbed, or tortured. The circumstances of his death are ambiguous – neither the readers nor other characters hear anything about him again.

Another example of a character's destiny being unclear is that of Jawad's girlfriend, Reem, who disappears after her official engagement with Jawad. After many months of agony, during which he searches and asks people about Reem's whereabouts, Jawad receives a letter from her, which informs him of her newly discovered breast cancer and her subsequent flight to Jordan. In the letter, Reem wonders why she should have cancer when she is not yet forty. The doctor informs her that "cancer rates have quadrupled in recent years and it might be the depleted uranium used in the ordnance in

1991” (*Corpse Washer* 114). The letter does not mention any address or offers any clues as to how Jawad can find or reply to her. He spends days thinking of whether she is still alive or has died of sickness. She remains the subject of his dreams and nightmares for a long time. In the very first chapter, he has a dream of her “lying naked on her back on a marble bench” asking him to wash her as if she is dead and ready for the burial, but she is still talking. Jawad is confused and keeps asking her how he can wash her if she is “not dead?” (1) In another nightmare, he “see[s] two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breast,” most likely to indicate that death has taken her life through her breast cancer (123). Likewise, other nightmares either foreshadow future events or mirror the real world. The fact that the characters’ fate is not certain or at least known render life and death nearly undistinguishable.

Death is hovering everywhere, and the fear of being its next victim contributes to the conflation of life and death. People think that they may lose their life in any moment simply because of the many possibilities that can lead to their death. They do not have to be associated with the government or willingly involved in any risky business to increase the probability of their death. If there is a call for war, it is difficult to say no; both Jawad’s brother, Ameer, and his childhood Art schoolteacher, Raid, are killed in the war with Iran. Later, Jawad, as a corpse washer, tells of the many ways in which people are dying – robberies, car explosions, suicide belt, sectarian killing, revenge, suicide bombs, and many others. Death has become “more generous” in providing Jawad’s sustenance (104) who is living exclusively with the dead. He starts thinking that “[t]he Angel of Death is working overtime, as if hoping for a promotion, perhaps to become a god” (131). The prevalence of death in Iraq gives it another shape; it is no longer scary or dramatic;

on the contrary, it is simply normal. Death has become a commonplace because the likelihood of witnessing violent injury, massive death, and grotesque scenes is high in everyday life. According to Antoon, the novel is a series of “ruminations about life and death and how one and if one can ever come to terms with all this death” (“I think of myself as a global citizen”). Death is part of people’s everyday life, a life full of dead people. In the novel’s Iraq, life and death are not even two sides of the same coin; they are indistinguishable. This life-and-death confusion reflects the troubled mind and the damaged thoughts and memory of a traumatized person.

Traumatized people are overwhelmed with fear and struggling to reestablish the lost sense of safety in their lives to the degree that they stop taking any risks to improve their future. Psychologists have recognized this attitude as part of the “the constrictive symptoms” of traumatic neurosis. Herman argues that these symptoms affect not only the victims’ thought, memory, and states of consciousness, but rather “the entire field of purposeful action and initiative” (46). Constrictive symptoms interfere even with the victims’ anticipation and future planning. When making plans, they rely more on superstition, lucky charms, and omens rather than reasonable thinking and true ability (Herman 46). Jawad, for example, thinks of his life as one controlled by death whose “fingers were crawling everywhere” (*Corpse Washer* 104). He is living by death and with death and will never be able to escape its monotonous rhythm. He refuses to get married to the woman he loves just because he has no hopes of a prosperous future and is unwilling to trap her with his risky and meaningless life that he himself is no more able to handle: “All I knew was that I was tired of myself and of everything around me. I knew that my heart was a hole one could pass through but never reside in. I desired her and wanted her,

but I was drained. I was not material for marriage or a family” (153). He prefers that she emigrates with her family and leave him to find better chances in living a meaningful life outside of the country. It seems like Iraq is the place of trauma and coping with death on daily basis with no space for a fulfilling, happy life or a possible prosperous future. Case studies of trauma victims show their “foreshortened sense of future” and their expectation of an impending death at a young age:

In avoiding any situations reminiscent of the past trauma or any initiative that might involve future planning and risk, traumatized people deprive themselves of those new opportunities for successful coping that might mitigate the effect of traumatic experience. Thus, Constrictive symptoms, though they may represent an attempt to defend against overwhelming emotional state, exact high price for whatever protection they afford. They narrow and deplete the quality of life and ultimately perpetuate the effects of the traumatic event. (Herman 47)

Traumatic experience makes people hopeless and powerless; they simply resign to what is happening and start thinking that they have no power to change or improve the situation. In the winter of 2003, Jawad’s family is aware of another war coming. The mother continues to ask her husband and son about what they should be doing about this war. Both of their answers show their resignation; Jawad can only think of staying and “wait[ing] things out,” while his father does not see any option other than staying home, for, after all, “this is not the first war” (*Corpse Washer* 61). Iraqis “get ready for wars” as if “welcoming a visitor” they are fully acquainted with and “hoping to make his stay a pleasant one” (61). People are resigned to the situation and have lost hope of being able to stop the destruction of the country and the mass death of its people.

Trauma disconnected people from the normal life around them. They live in a bubble or a circle that is centered on performing day-by-day activities like robots not

thinking of any future or dreams except for a desire to survive. The victims' system of self-defense or willingness to change becomes completely disconnected when they realize that neither escaping nor resisting is effective or even possible: "Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over" (Herman 34). This explains the Iraqis feeling of helplessness in the face of the threats and the terror that they have been experiencing for decades during Saddam Hussein reign. They are never able to voice their opposing views and reactions despite being forced into a series of wars with neighbor countries that lead them to lose their lives and that of their loved ones. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist's brother, Ameer, is a medical student who dies, among countless other Iraqis, in the war with Iran. Many people think of the war decision as another reckless act of Saddam Hussein that made them live eight years of hunger, fear, and death. Jawad's father complains about how losing his son to the war turns to be utterly brutal and meaningless when the government announces war again:

In August of 1990, almost three and a half years after Ammoury's death, Saddam invaded Kuwait. To secure the eastern front with Iran and withdraw troops from there to Kuwait, he agreed to all the Iranian conditions and relinquished all the demands for which he'd waged the war in the first place. Father punched the table and shouted: "why the hell did we fight for eight years then and what in hell did Ammoury die for?" (*Corpse Washer* 13)

By agreeing to the demands that were the cause of the first war to go into another, Hussein puts eight years of loss and suffering in vain. Even though people are fully aware that this other war is as futile, they are completely passive toward any form of possible change. Some people might even start thinking that going into wars is normal and justified because the overwhelming presence of terror has affected their judgmental insights. As

Abram Kardiner explains, terror and helplessness overwhelm the victims, leading their perceptions to be inaccurate and pervaded with fear, their coordinative functions for judgement and discrimination to be ineffectual, and their whole apparatus for purposeful activity to crash (qtd in Herman 35). The stories that people hear about the violent practices of the Ba'ath ruling party against citizens suspected of planning to revolt against the government along with the pervasive presence of security spies paralyze people's mind and let them simply accept the situation and try to cope with it.

The act of resignation is part of a larger estranged perspective on life in general. People in the novel's Iraq are living in a stagnant, inactive situation merely waiting for death that it does not even matter anymore how people lose their lives: "[w]e, who are waiting in line for our turn, keep mulling over death, but the dead person just dies and is indifferent" (*Corpse Washer* 55). As an artist, Jawad expresses a great admiration for the work of the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, especially his statue *The Man Walking*: "I felt that that man he sculpted was sad and isolated" (41). Giacometti's experience through the first and second world wars makes Jawad's identification with the earlier artist's views emblematic. The trauma of living through a prolonged period of war and destruction has led both Jawad and Giacometti to see life as empty and meaningless. Just like Jawad himself, Giacometti's man is "sad and isolated" (41). Traumatized people experience a high sense of alienation and inner deadness that lead them to lack the ability to see beauty in life and in simple activities that normal people do (Herman 49). Before leaving Iraq, Jawad reflects on his relationship to the place: "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.... 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 Washer* 175). Trauma changes people’s perception of life by taking away the meaning, drama, and the purpose of living, leading everyone to see life as void of hope, progress, and love.

Traumatic events are also recognized for their damaging effect on human relationships, family bonds, and trust through breaching the attachments of love, friendship, and community and shattering the construction of the victims’ self that is formed and sustained mainly in relation to others in the society (Herman 51). They are known as well for their role in undermining and violating faith and the belief systems in divine order and existence, which is generally considered as the source of meaning in the human experience:

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, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliation of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel they belong more to the dead than to the living. (52)

When victims cry for help is not answered, they lose their faith and trust in what they considered their protector. Throughout the novel, Jawad has many conversations with his mother and father that show his opinion about God, after life, and judgement day. He laments to his father the increasing number of the corpses at the *Mghaysil*: “If you were alive, Father, would you say that that is fate and God’s will? ... You were heavily armed with faith, and that made your heart a castle. My heart, by contrast, is an abandoned house whose windows are shattered and doors unhinged. Ghosts play inside it, and the winds wail” (*Corpse Washer* 3). Jawad’s lack of strong belief in God and anything related to religious and the after world is an essential reason behind his rejection to

pursue the profession of his ancestors. After the death of his father, Jawad's mother begged him to wash the corpse of his father, but he was never able to do it: "[h]ow could I tell her that I wasn't totally convinced that there was such a thing as a soul?" (64) Jawad never fully accepts that concept of washing corpses or that this job is a holy task that God will reward him on performing it. He is living the trauma of being obligated to be in constant contact with dead bodies. For him, this job is a destiny that is exactly the opposite of his dreams. Mardi Horowitz claims that traumatic events are always in struggle with the victims' "'inner schemata' of self in relation to the world." They abolish traumatized people's "fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation" (Herman 51).

The novel's Iraq is a traumatizing place that is associated with death and alienation that renders departure a key point in the Iraqi experience. People think of leaving the country as the only way to survive. Diaspora is growing theme in the Iraqi fiction, making many literary texts about Iraq a case of the trauma of leaving. People are either dying, thus leaving the scene altogether or emigrating to other countries. Many characters in the novel leave Iraq because they have lost hope of any improvement. One example is the family of Jawad's second girlfriend, Ghayda'. Her father has been killed by a suicide bomb while waiting in a row of applicants for a military job. He used to have his own private work as a shop owner, but it was destroyed during the war. After her father's death and the heated sectarian conflict in their area, Ghayda', her mother, and her younger brother come to live with Jawad and his mother, who happens to be their distant relative. Before leaving the country to join her uncle in Sweden, Ghayda' develops a sexual relationship with Jawad and hopes to marry him. However, Jawad is not at all

satisfied with his life and work, and he thinks of getting married as an act of bringing another person into his personal turmoil. He is living with death all day and dreaming of death all night. He secretly spends nights with Ghayda', takes Jawad away from the horrors of death. He is sad to leave and disappoint her, but he does not think it is fair to drag her into his distressed life. Leaving the country is a better opportunity for her and he hopes to take the same path one day.

Jawad thinks of leaving Iraq to settle temporarily in Jordan until he can find the chance to join his uncle in Germany, where he can pursue his passionate study and work in fine arts. He can no longer deal with his daily encounter with death in its ugliest shapes because of the increasing of chaos and the lack of security: "I can't do it anymore. I'm suffocating. I'm not cut out for this job. I wasn't planning on doing it for two years. I can't sleep at night. Nightmares are driving me insane" (*Corpse Washer* 171). His college professor, who left the country for Jordan in 2003 because of the restless political situation and the lack of security, has promised to help Jawad temporarily set up his life there until he can apply for an asylum and join his uncle in Germany. Jawad's uncle, Sabri, left Iraq because he was communist and anti-Baathist. The Ba'ath party has a very strong network of intelligence, especially after the Iranian war, and being a communist means that he will be either killed or imprisoned and tortured. Sabri visited Iraq in the post-Saddam Era and has promised to help Jawad find opportunities to study and work abroad. However, Jawad loses all his hopes of a change and is obligated to continue working as a corpse washer after he is denied entrance to Jordan on the borders due to the new regulations. The number of Iraqis who want to escape from the hazardous situation in Iraq and go to Jordan increased considerably after 2003, which led the Jordanian

government to establish new regulations that would limit the number of people. They increased the residency fees, which should be renewed every year and restricted entrance to families only. Jawad is immediately denied entrance because he is single. His going back to Iraq and specifically to his corpse-washing profession represents the crisis or the most devastating moment in his life. He is certain that from that point on his life will be a mere representation of death and waiting for his own death. Jawad's dreams of a better life are crushed by going back to the place where death is suffocating him, the place that reminds him of his lost childhood dreams. The words with which Jawad ends his narrative show a great deal of his resignation and passivity:

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

The pomegranate tree that is planted outside the *mghaysil* is irrigated by the water used to wash the bodies that death has seized their souls, making it a representation of "life as death." Jawad whose life is sustained by working with death, is no different from this tree. Exactly like the tree, he is tied to death and has no possible life outside of the *mghaysil*, in which death is restraining him. However, that confinement does not seem to be the end of it, death is taking him to a "bottomless pit" or a formless state of the obscure that is similar to the underworld in its mystery and horror. Neither Jawad nor anyone else knows to what this increasing toll of death is leading. Jawad's relation to death can be a symbolic view of the people's relation to death. People used to see death as something dreadful and obscure, exactly like Jawad visiting his father's work place and seeing his father washing corpses for the first time. By the end of the novel, death is

not only something normal because it is seen everywhere on daily basis, it is even stronger. The presence of death is traumatizing and enslaving people that they are not achieving any progress in their lives. It has cut their “branches” from the rest of the living world, making them stagnant beings merely waiting for their turn to die.

CONCLUSION

The Iraqi narrative is increasingly occupying the headlines as a story of violence and terror, but little is shown about the human side of the country and the traumatizing experience of the people. Sinan Antoon's trauma narratives offer an inventory of the damaging effects that three decades of wars and oppression have caused to the quality of life in Iraq. He is a wounded storyteller who has been through the sufferings of Iraqis for around fifteen years, which led him to assume the responsibility of giving words to their wounds. Iraqis identify with Antoon's characters because they lived the same years of oppression and suffer the same loss and fear of everlasting wars. Reading literary texts that reflect on and speak of their wounds can help them heal and move forward. I, as an Iraqi, relate to the chaotic stories in Sinan Antoon trauma novels. The narrative, despite the prevailing occurrence of nightmares and surrealism, feels extremely real for me. Antoon uses nightmares and surrealism as a tool to narrate and cope with the horrors of trauma. However, the contents of the characters' nightmares are highly similar to reality. Additionally, Antoon refers to specific real events and dates to further emphasize the illusion of reality. Analyzing Antoon's *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* and *The Corpse Washer* through the lens of trauma theory shows the fictional characters' and their real life Iraqi counterparts' estranged views on living in the present and the future, the merging of the boundaries between life-death, and the growing diasporic urge. Iraqis' prolonged trauma, as portrayed by Antoon, offers an interpretation of the social, political, and economic situation of the country.

WORKS CITED

- Antoon, Sinan. *The Baghdad Blues*. Brownsville: Harbor Mountain Press, 2007. Print.
- . "Conversation with Sinan Antoon: Poet and Novelist." The University of Arizona Poetry Center. Interview by Asli İğsüz. 30 Nov. 2010. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
- . *The Corpse Washer*. Trans. Sinan Antoon. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Print.
- . "Dead Poets Society." *The Nation* 276.20 (2003): 25-29. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 17 Oct. 2014.
- . *Ijaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*. Trans. Rebecca C. Johnson and Sinan Antoon. San Francisco: City Lights, 2007. Print.
- . "In Civilian Snapshot of Iraq, an Artist is a Corpse Washer" Interview by Kelly McEvers. NPR West. N.p., 30 Mar. 2014. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
- . "Rear Window - Sinan Antoon: Iraqi Author." *You Tube*. You Tube, 19 Aug. 2015. Web. 7 Oct. 2015.
- . "Sinan Antoon: 'I Think of Myself as a Global Citizen'." *The Electronic Intifada*. Interview by Dina Omar. 7 Apr. 2010. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
- . *Ya Maryam*. Beirut: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2012. Print.
- Barber, Grant. "Three Percent Review." Rev. of *The Corpse Washer*, by Sinan Antoon. *Three Percent: A Source for International Literature at the University of Rochester*. University of Rochester, 9 Sept. 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2014.

- Berger, James. "Trauma and Literary Theory." Review of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*; *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*; *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. *Contemporary Literature* 38.3 (1997): 569–582. *Jstor*. Web. 1 August 2015.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.
- Charara, Hayan. Introduction. *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*. Ed. Hayan Charara. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008. xiii-xxxiii. Print.
- Fahmy, Nazek. "Book review: Sinan Antoon's 'The interpreter's tale'." *Ahramonline*. Ed. Fouad Mansour and Dina Samak. Al-Ahram Establishment, 4 Sept. 2013. Web. 25 Oct. 2014.
- Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W.Norton & Company INC, 1961. Print.
- Herman, Judith L. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: BasicBooks, 1997. Print.
- Kachachi, Inaam. *The American Granddaughter*. Trans. Nariman Youssif. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. Print.
- LeVine, Mark. "About Baghdad." *Radical History Review* 95 (2006): 262-267. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 Sept. 2015.

- Luckhurst, Roger. "In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq." *Contemporary Literature* 53.4 (2012): 713-737. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 June 2015.
- Masmoudi, Ikram. "Portraits of Iraqi Women: Between Testimony and Fiction." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 4.1/2 (2010): 59-77. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.
- Mostafa, Dalia S. "Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabī Jābir." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40.2 (2009): 208-36. Jstor. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Signet Classics, 1961. Print.
- Resick, Patricia A. *Stress and Trauma*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001. Print.
- Saadawi, Ahmed. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Beirut: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2013. Print.
- Salbi, Zainab. *Between Two Worlds*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006. Print.