
Representation of War Trauma, Fracturing Experiences and Oppression in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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Original Article

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Abstract

*War trauma of non-Western countries and regions has always been neglected and marginalized by the Western intelligentsia. Their concepts and theories of trauma remained politically limited to the Western trauma of Holocaust, 9/11 and the others only. In the recent past, the non-Western Anglophone writers, theorists and scholars have tried to give voice to their respective trauma experiences of war and war crimes done to their people. Arab Anglophone writers also contributed to the field to resist the 'othering' and to make the outer world get abreast of the strategic war violence conducted in the Arab world. Sinan Antoon, an Iraq-American diaspora novelist is also a resonant voice in this regard. His novel *The Corpse Washer* narrated in the backdrop of perpetual martial exercises in Iraq has been selected for the present study. Key characters and the exemplary key situations have been analyzed through the theoretical threads of abreactive model of Freud modified and advanced by Cathy Caruth in her works. The tenets of the model conjoined with the ideas of 'latency' and PTSD symptoms explained by Cathy Caruth have been propped up by the other related theorists. The research will be an impressive addition to the field and it can be implicated to all those regions which remained or are currently under the clouds of war.*

Keywords: War, Trauma, Corpse(s), Latency, Dream(s), Flashback(s)

1. Introduction

Trauma is the response to an intensely disturbing or poignant event that overpowers an individual's capability to cope up with the adverse situations. It contains deep personal suffering (Caruth, 1995) which further produces feelings of helplessness, diminishes the sense of one's self, and ultimately hinders the ability of feeling the full range of experiences and emotions. In this regard, Erikson (1995) writes, "[trauma means] a blow to the tissues of body—or more frequently ... to the tissues of mind" (p. 183). Such physical and psychic domination seizes the inner landscape of the victims, witnesses and the survivors.

Physical and psychic occupation is associated with the issues of 'coping with trauma' (Robinson, 2018). This means that the victims and witnesses become vulnerable to the negative effects of trauma which is represented through *post-traumatic stress disorder*. PTSD, previously called "shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis" (Caruth, 1995, p. 3), is a psychiatric disorder which does exist in the people who have either undergone or witnessed some disastrous events—be they are natural accidents or human-caused events ("*What is posttraumatic stress disorder?*," n.d.; Caruth, 1995). Victims and witnesses, writes Huppertz (2019), of such accidents, violence, rape, wars and political persecutions could rightly be considered the victims of

trauma. It is because of the reliving in the world of an actual accident even after it has long been lost in the past. Caruth (1995) has packed this discussion in the term 'latency' that she borrowed from Freud. The term 'latency' refers to that period of time during which the effects of the adverse and violent experiences are not apparent. The upshot of such events is the difficult sleeping, anger, detachment or estrangement from others, sense of helplessness, agitation, daydreaming and nightmares in the victims. These states have been summarized in "Coping with a Trauma Event" (n.d.) and Huppertz (2019) as the symptoms of increased arousal, avoidance and reliving.

Trauma is linked with the psychological and physical wounds at individual level, and social and cultural damages at collective level. Both types of trauma affect the implicit and explicit individual and collective memories of the victims and witnesses, hence reconfiguring the identities (Hunt, 2010). So, trauma is not simply and utterly an internal process, rather it is basically an experience of some external event (Gailiene, 2019). The external events are the natural and human-caused disasters. Human-caused disasters as external events are further splitted into technological accidents and willful or intentional events. Whereas technological accidents involve the crises like air crashes, industrial accidents and mass transportation accidents, willful events refer to mass murders, genocides, terrorist activities and war (Kirmayer, Kienzler, Afana & Pedersen, 2010).

Memories of the past disastrous events haunt the victims and witnesses in the present (Aydin, 2017). "[*Hauntings* display] the power of histories of mass violence" (Wale, Gobodo-Madikizela & Prager, 2020, p. 1) because memories of past violence do not stay calm but disturb the victims the most. This can rightly be associated and studied in relation to PTSD symptoms. So, the willful or intentional events like war also cause trauma for the victims as the memories of [battlefield] also haunt the victims in the present (Hunt, 2010). Moreover, traumatic experiences of war also leave behind the silent wounds, fractured identity and destructed culture. In this regard, Hunt (2010) points out that war experiences change one's sense of self or identity consisting one's beliefs about one's own self, the world and the future.

Twentieth century witnessed numerous wars which left indelible marks on the psyche of the individuals, and the social and cultural values and identities of the victim groups. The wars including two world wars (Mackinnon, 2000), Holocaust (Hunt, 2010), wars of independence and civil wars took away the lives of millions of people which shattered the social and cultural systems of communities at a large scale. Due to such massive loss at individual and collective levels, the century is called the "century of almost unbroken war(s)" (Hobsbawn, 2018). Referring to the same intensity of the war, Hunt (2010) writes:

On the basis of the figures available, I calculated that, overall, around 240 million people (give or take 50 million) had died as a result of these large wars in the twentieth century- not counting the victims of smaller wars. Adding the injured, that makes possibly 1 billion casualties. (p. 1)

The scope of war crimes, which made the war experiences bitter and intense, is very wide. The acts of war violence include mass killings, genocides, forced migrations, rapes, capturing and curfews (Hunt, 2010) which modified the victims' sense of self or identity (Aydin, 2017; Hunt, 2010). All such experiences made the victims or the witnesses suspicious to the social, cultural, religious, political and economic systems which they used to believe in. Except it, at individual level, the witness had to undergo "the breakdown of psychological functioning" (Hunt, 2010, p. 7) which comprises memory, emotions and behaviours (Huppertz, 2019).

2. Literature Review

War literature is about the actions taken place on the battlefields or in the home fronts of civilians. The war witnesses either soldiers or the civilians are depicted as the sufferers or the survivors. War literature originating from the epic poetry of the classics and themedieval (Calloway, 2020) reached its culmination with the 19th and 20th centuries' novels ("English Literature- The Literature of World War II," n.d.).

Although war related themes gained popularity through literary texts, yet the role of non-literary texts cannot be ignored. In this regard Brosman (1992) writes that in addition to literary genres like fiction, drama, and poetry "war has been treated in many different modes and kinds of texts"(p. 85), considered to be non-literary or marginally literary texts including memoirs, chronicles, histories, military, and other archives.

War literature has a lot many functions. It records not only the causes and conduct of martial conflicts but also "the manner in which they are lived, felt, used and transformed by participants. These functions of war have been noted by Brosman (1992) as moral, social, and psychological. It means that war literature demonstrates the effects of war. Highlighting the negative effects of war, Murthy and Lakshaminarayana (2006) write that war destroys communities and families and often disrupts development of the social and economic fabric of the nations too. To understand such destructive nature and impact of war, we are to go through the approaches of psychology, anthropology, cultural studies etc. in coordination with each other. In the context of war literature, when the aforementioned disciplines complement each other, war literature becomes an interdisciplinary subject.

War literature as an interdisciplinary subject studies war crimes, which are the thematic components of war literature. The relationship among violence, disappearances, power struggle, dislocation, forced displacement and genocide are the umbrella themes of the war literature. These crises of war affect the psyche of the individuals and the identity of the communities and cultures. Disappearances as war crime, in three phases—capture, detention and execution, are conducted by regimes against their political opponents. Civil wars, on the other hand, are characterized by using torture and forced disappearances of civilians. In the same way, genocide is the deliberate killing of an ethnic, religious or racial group. Genocides cause physical and mental harms to the members of the groups. Except it, war brings about forced migration or forced displacement which is the result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations.

Iraq, the battlefield since the beginning of the 21st century, also faced political and martial turmoils, causing the civilians huge dislocation and fracturing traumatic experiences and reconfigured identities. Following Morrissey's (2021) concept of "the correlation between trauma and literature", Iraqi Anglophone writers' depiction of trauma is also the outcome of the wars and foreign invasions experienced by Iraq during Iraqi Civil Wars. War trauma represented in Iraqi Anglophone narratives is the response to the killing of over 182,000 Iraqis ("Overview: The Iraq war,"2007) and the migration on a large scale. A statistical analysis shows that over 4.4 million Iraqis were internally displaced, and an additional number of 254,100 were refugees abroad ("Iraqi Refugees," n.d.). This all yielded the individual and collective traumatic experiences of displacement from the parentland, conflicting memories and loss of identity.

3. Rationale and Delimitations of the Study

Iraqi Anglophone literature as part of Arab Anglophone literature or the non-Western literature remained neglected in the past. Following the same paradigm of 'othering', the trauma literature belonging to the non-Western countries also kept abandoned and marginalized by the Western

intelligentsia. Post 9/11. Holocaust (Caruth, 1996) and other western traumas and their after effects were narrated, propagated and exposed to the world at the maximum in the recent past. But now-a-days, Arab Anglophone trauma literature is not only receiving currency and attention from the university departments of the Middle Eastern Studies but also from the political, social, and literary intellectuals. Responding to the Western agenda, the writers like Sinan Antoon endeavored to highlight the traumatic and post traumatic experiences of their parent-lands.

In addition to the presentation of the true Arab self in general and Iraqi identity in particular, Antoon's works are trying to make the world to pay heed to their subjugated silenced voice. As far as the present investigation on Iraqi Anglophone fiction is concerned, the primary source of study is an Iraqi novel *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon. This study is focussed on the representation of traumatic fractured experiences and memories in the novel in the light of the framework built up on the tenets of Trauma Studies *abreactive model* modified and advanced by Cathy Caruth in her *Trauma: Exploration of Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996). The concepts of 'latency' and the (in) capacity of language to express the trauma events have also been engaged. To prop up the ideas, the concepts given by the other first and second wave trauma theorists—i.e. the traditionalists and the pluralists have been employed. So, the study will open a window to see through the fractured experiences, disfigured identities and culture, and latency of memory. It will not only explore the trauma narrated in the text but also give us an idea how the persecuted people feel after they have gone through some traumatic situation. Although, the study is focused on an Iraqi novel, its findings can be implicated to the other regions' traumas as well.

4. Theoretical Framework

Trauma, its representation and the role of memory in structuring the individual and cultural identities are the core concerns of trauma studies (Mambrol, 2018). Trauma theory has its roots in Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), but in the modern age, it has got special place in the field of literature through Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996), and the works of other First Wave critics like Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman. According to the first wave trauma theorists called the *traditionalists*, trauma is 'unrepresentable', 'unspeakable' and 'the discursive production of latent past memory' (Toreman, 2003). In response to the concepts of Traditional Caruthian Model, Pluralistic Trauma Model is based on the works of Ann Cvetkovich, Greg Forster, Amy Hungerford, Naomi Mandel, Leys and Michelle Balaev who challenged the traditional unspeakable trope (Mambrol, 2018; Balaev, 2014). The pluralistic Model criticizes or in fact elaborates the term "Unspeakable" that is related with 'Abreactive Model'. This unspeakability is linked with the social norms that make the writer or narrator to be silent (Balaev, 2008, p. 157). The role of place and one's displacement from the place may also add to the traumatic experience which later on looks back into the history, culture and identity of an individual or a group.

Primarily *Abreactive Model* was given by Freud. Simply, an abreaction is an emotional and unconscious reaction that a sufferer has in response to something that brings back an agonizing situation one had experienced in the past. The abreactive model was later on modified and advanced by the First Wave Critic Cathy Caruth in her works. The major tenet of this model is the 'speechless terror' that is shown in the narrative through various techniques like 'temporal linguistics gaps', "dreams", and "monologues". This model also describes trauma as timeless, repetitious and infectious (p. 152).

Assimilating the concept of abreaction with PTSD, Caruth (1995) provides that the trauma responses are usually belated. These responses assume the forms of repeated flashbacks, dreams and

hulluncinations which entail the reliving of an adverse event. Such dreams, according to Caruth (with reference to Freud) are not understood in terms of some dreamer's (here sufferer, survivor, or victim) wish or unconscious meaning, rather it occurs incomprehensibly against the will of the sufferer/dreamer. It is this very insistent return of events and the related sentiments that constitutes trauma. In all this process, what is more noteworthy for Freud is "the return of the event after a period of delay" (Caruth, 1995, p. 7). This periodical process called 'latency' presents trauma as "the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return" (p. 7)

5. Analysis

Sinan Antoon has documented the occupied, persecuted and devastated Iraq. The story of Jawad, the protagonist of the novel is a powerful narration of all that was faced by Iraq. The story is on the locale of Baghdad majorally and partially in Najaf and the borders of Jordan. The protagonist wishes to become a sculptor but his father forces him to join his ancestral profession of corpse washing. He practices it for a while and then avoids it for a long time. Later on, after the death of his father, the circumstances force him to adopt the same profession.

The story employs many techniques to picture the traumatic oppression and the war ridden fracturing experiences. The story, following the Abreactive Model which influenced Cathy Caruth (1995; 1996), presents the hallucinatory and involuntary experiences consisting of dissociated sensorimotor phenomena, including visual images, sensations, emotions, and/or motor acts pertaining to past traumatic experiences... these traumatic memories are usually reactivated by so called triggers (Hart & Steele, n.d.).

The Corpse Washer is, according to Elimelekh (2017), the story that represents the shadows of unending upheavals of eight years long *Iran-Iraq War* (1980-1988), *Gulf War* (1990-1991), *Saddam Hussein's Dictatorship*, and American invasion in 2003 which resulted in the loss of loved ones (Motyl & Arghavan, 2018). In the novel, trauma is both personal and communal. Personal trauma can be seen at certain points where we find its relation with certain individual characters. The character of Jawad is seen suffering from personal trauma twice in the novel—the trauma of his lost love. Dreams are triggered through memory and the unspeakable comes in the narrative form. For example, the novel starts with a dream as:

She is lying naked on her back on a marble bench...I think I hear a car approaching...masked men wearing Khaki uniforms and carrying machine guns rush toward us... two men forced me to get down on my knees... I hear Reem's shrieks, the laughs and grunts of the men... (Antoon, 2013, pp. 1-2).

In the very next lines, we find the protagonist describing the pathetic scene of his own assassination with the help of the phrases "cold blade of the knife penetrating" (p. 2), and "head [rolls] like a ball on the ground" (p. 2). After this nightmare he wakes up "panting and sweating" (p. 2). The dream is also a triggered abreaction by the surrounding blood-shedding of which he knows due to his profession of corpse washing. His affiliation with Reem (his lost love) can also be observed in the novel when he often sees her with severed head, and uttering the words "Wash me, darling" (p. 3) so that "[we] can be together" (Bahora, 2015, p. 184). The repeated dreams about Reem that haunt Jawad become understandable when we read about Reem's sudden disappearance and the letter she sends for Jawad in which she tells him the reason of her disappearance—i.e. Breast cancer. With the passage of time, this traumatic experience is faded away by his relationship with his cousin who later on also leaves him. Here, the personal trauma is connected with the collected trauma, because the cancer of

Reem is due to the use of uranium (p. 114). Bahooora (2015) writes about this situation as “the narration of violent corporeal dismemberment... decapitation” (p. 185) that adds to the contemporary Iraqi experience. This dismemberment is actually the dismemberment of self and identity.

Death is prevailing through out the text. The more Jawad avoids the idea of death, the more he faces the death scenes. He expresses that “death is not content with what it has taken from [him] in [his] waking hours, it insists on haunting [him] even in [his] sleep”(p. 3). This state signifies to the role of *abreaction of memory*. Whatever he loses in the form of his love has been elaborated in the previous paragraph. He describes a metaphorical relationship between death and himself as a *postman* and a *receiver of letters* (p. 3) who opens and washes, dries, and perfumes, [wraps] them finally for “their final reader—the grave (Restuccia, 2018, p. 62). *The Corpse Washer* (2013) not only poetically highlights sensuous aspects of Iraqi life and questions its oppressive atmosphere, but it also enacts the theory of *The Severed Head* (Restuccia, 2018) by making death a character (Restuccia, 2018, p. 62). *The Corpse Washer* responds to actual decapitations by giving them substantial aesthetic representation. He also refers towards the perpetual increase in the proportion of corpses day by day (p. 3). Death prevails the *mghaysil* to such a great extent that it seems to be “the real owner” (p. 32) of the business for whom Jawad’s father works. When the writer narrates the account of Jawad’s very first observation of a corpse washing, he can’t forget it. He feels that his family lives on someone’s death. He narrates it as:

But I imagined that death had 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...It was hard to believe that these were the same fingers that had rubbed a dead body only a few hours before. (p. 22).

Later on, when he himself starts working with his father at the *mghaysil* he is more followed by the concept of death. Even, in his dream he meets the death angel who asks him to note the names of all whose souls he will take away the next day. In the chapter sixteen of the novel, the resemblance of the face of a corpse with his late friend Basim brings him to flashbacks. He starts recalling the times he spent with Basim, his colleague at military service (p. 55). He remembers how “[Basim] had been thrown onto his stomach... [and] he felt heavy, unresponsive” (p. 60).

Military oppression has also been woven artistically with the theme and the design of the narrative. For instance, after describing imminent danger of 2003 war (p, 61), Antoon presents the scene where Jawad’s father “dies of a heart attack while [he is] bent down in prayer during one of the bombing in 2003. This scene is analogous to the case of Reem’s breast cancer by dint of excessive use of uranium. On the other hand, death of Jawad’s father is the death of cultural values. Due to the patrolling of American forces, no relative visits their family and only three persons accompanied the coffin of the deceased Kazam son of Hasan (p. 69) to Najaf (p. 65) which is the burying place for the Shiitte community. The way to Najaf is depicted as a very deadly route where the running car with a coffin on its roof has to face “an American platoon heading [their] way”(p. 66). Antoon joins the traumatic experience with *place* here identity and culture do live (Balaev, 2008). Additionally, because of the mayhem of Americans cause in Baghdad, death becomes a soccer player: corpses pile up “like goals scored by death on behalf of rabid teams in a never-ending game”(p. 33). American invaders “loot] public property, ministeries, the national library, and the national museum...it was strange to learn that the academy [has] become a strategic target” (p. 71). Its transformation into a place with “aweful stench,...rubbles and metal [scattered]” (p. 73) strengthens the traumatic fracturing experience which also produces shattered identity.

The novel artistically presents an arduous melancholic struggle, replete with the anxiety of detaching from the father, the mother, and brother, as a way of showing the thick melancholic quagmire of Iraq. The personal trauma coexists with the collective trauma as the case of Jawad is a real type for the entire Iraqi community. In the third chapter of the novel, the story of martyrdom of his elder brother Ameer who was “transformed “from a doctor’ into “a martyr” (p. 8) in al-Faw battles is the best example of personal and communal trauma. The death of Ammoury (Ameer) changed the environment of the entire home. Ameer’s death is also triggered by the corpses brought to the *mghaysil* as the face of a dead body reminds him of his dead friend Basim (for details, see previous discussion).

The text in addition offers itself, like *Perseus’s shield* (Restuccia, 2018), as a thorough reflection of death, riveted on the washing of corpses, many of which are described in horrific details. Early in the book, a man burned to death at a petrochemical plant is brought in to be washed: “The fire had eaten away his skin . . . discolored all over.” Jawad vomits that day and is “sick for days” (p. 35). The culmination of the entire book is the unforgettable chapter forty-five—in which a man brings in his dead son, Habib, in the form of “only the head” (p. 40). The decapitated head triggers his dreams about his own head which was being kicked and rolled on the ground by the men wearing khaki uniform. Although he is feeling “disgusted,” Jawad washes with great delicacy and care this severed head. Antoon’s mouthpiece Jawad gives its detailed description as: “The edges of the severed neck were yellowish like the rest of the face. I could see the tattered skin tissue and flesh and the dried pink and gray ends of blood vessels. There was a huge scar on his right cheek and a black spot on his forehead” (p.41). Jawad scrubs Habib’s hair “carefully from the forehead all the way to the neck,” as his assistant pours the water, causing a “few clots of dried blood [to fall] off the neck” (p. 42).

6. Conclusion

The novel provides a deep understanding of the effects of war and oppression on the human psychology. One occurrence triggers the other where latent memory plays a key role. Jawad and Death both stand at the primary and secondary levels of protagonism. The story is embedded in huncinations, reoccurring nightmares, repeated flashbacks and so on which strengthen the notions of *abreactive model* and *Unspeakability of terror* proposed by Cathy Caruth and other First Wave trauma theorists. The analysis also boasts solidarity with the people of Iraq who sufferings are still accompanying their souls and minds. If we have a social survey of Iraq, we will acquire sufficient data which will guide us that their trauma is still perpetuating because the haunting memories can not be controlled. Ultimately, the same research paradigm can be used for the trauma narratives of the other non-Western world whose trauma is always kept marginalized by the West.

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