




University of Tehran press

## Research in Contemporary World Literature

<http://jor.ut.ac.ir>, Email: [pajuhesh@ut.ac.ir](mailto:pajuhesh@ut.ac.ir)

p-ISSN : 2588-4131 e-ISSN: 2588 -7092

### Necropoetics and the Art of Death in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

Kotaba Saleh Fenjan <sup>✉</sup>  0000-0003-3754-3941

1. Department of Digital Media, Massmedia College, University of Thi-Qar, Nassiriya City -Iraq.E-mail: [qutaibasalih@yahoo.com](mailto:qutaibasalih@yahoo.com)

#### Article Info

**Article type:**

Research Article

**Article history:**

Received: 12 May 2025

Received in revised form: 9 July 2025

Accepted: 9 July 2025

Published online: Autumn 2025

**Keywords:**

*Necropoetics, Sinan Antoon, The Corpse Washer, war literature, Iraqi fiction, Achille Mbembe, death studies.*

#### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I use the new interpretive lens of necropoetics, the literary-critical discourse that intersects Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (the power of the state to kill) with aesthetics, to interpret Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013). Written from the perspective of a painter who became a corpse washer, Antoon's novel looks back at death, memory, and protest in post-invasion Iraq. While previous analyses of the novel draw on trauma studies, existentialist thought, and post-colonial theory, I argue that through necropoetics, we can read the political and narrative practice of aestheticizing death that structures Antoon's text. Rather than representing the loss that the artist-profession of corpse washing would typically represent, this practice transforms the cleaning of the dead from an act of loss to an act of artistic protest, of preservation against the political and historical obliteration of Iraqi lives. I show how necropoetics captures how Antoon's prose resists the commodity politics of war trauma and positions the act of death as an intimate, subversive, and transgressive force that rebels against the violence and amnesia of the state. Consequently, this narrative is not simply about loss but is itself a necropoetic act.

**Cite this article:** Saleh Fenjan, K. . "Necropoetics and the Art of Death in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* " *Research in Contemporary World Literature*, 2025, 30 (2), 369-395. DOI: [http://doi.org/ 10.22059/jor.2025.395118.2641](http://doi.org/10.22059/jor.2025.395118.2641)



© The Author(s).

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: [http://doi.org/ 10.22059/jor.2025.395118.2641](http://doi.org/10.22059/jor.2025.395118.2641)

## ***1. Introduction***

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) is situated in the landscape of death, a book of thresholds between dream and awakening, of ritual and ruin, of the remembered and forgotten body. Here we are at the heart of a fragmented structure: a novel about thresholds between dream and waking, between ritual and ruin, between the remembered body and the forgotten one. Jawad, who was to have been an artist, now takes his father's place washing bodies presents us not with a story of trauma or with its cure but with an elegy for lives lived under death's tutelage.

War, sanctions, and sectarian division have already for decades stripped Jawad's Baghdad bare, and the novel filters their impact into Jawad's daily experience through the debris of recollection, dream, and flotsam of memory. Death itself acts as the structure of this world, "Death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours," Jawad says, "It insists on haunting me even in my sleep. Isn't it enough that I toil all day tending to its eternal guests?" (Antoon 3). These are tender, bone-weary, and confused moments, where the novel registers violence as atmosphere rather than event.

It is in part a novel of a disrupted chronology; its narrative moves forward unevenly across a fractured timeline, slipping between real and surreal in order to act, perhaps, as an outward sign of the internal breakdown it charts, culminating in the recurring nightmare where Jawad is beheaded and watches his beloved Reem dragged away by men in masks, "I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood" (Antoon 2). The limits of his body have dissolved, the sense of a compressed time and madness have melded mourning with a sense of loss, "My heart," he muses, "is an abandoned house, with broken windows and unhinged doors, a place where the wind howls and the ghosts play"

(Antoon 3). He has had to let the work of his life and dreams take on this architectural form, and so the novel has built within it this broken space.

Amidst this context of disposal, one finds a flicker, a subject situated between despair and hope. Within the mechanics of washing the dead, Antoon creates an action that resists the imposition of absence. Jawad's labor becomes a necropoetic performance: a literary craft made for the dead, resisting the state's attempts to make them disappear, attend to those moments of handling the dead body, a limb's inert weight, the damp silence of a rinsed mouth, as an aesthetic and ritual moment in themselves, insisting on the dead's importance within this scene of death. Many scholars have interpreted Antoon's work through trauma studies, existentialism and postcolonial critique (Isakjee; Kadhim), but none of these close readings, while essential, have explicitly focused on the body or aesthetics of the corpse, preferring to circumscribe them. Instead, this article focuses on a necropoetic exploration of death in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, attempting to recover a critical pathway that accounts for literary works that focus on the material body and the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of its decay. It is within the space of this omission that multiple questions arise, raising a desire for and resistance to the notion that these questions could ever be satisfactorily answered.

In what way does Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* serve as an instance of necropoetic art, reconfiguring Achille Mbembe's theories of necropolitics as a literary language for addressing the dead, thereby creating a sphere of intimacy, care, and sovereign resistance to their ongoing negation in post-invasion Iraq?

How does *The Corpse Washer's* engagement with aesthetics (the ritualization of the dead body, the material reality of the dead body, the

muting of death's liminal and transtemporal qualities) dismantle the telos of trauma literature and the narrative agency assumed by some strands of postcolonial theory? What distinct necropoetics are at work in *The Corpse Washer* versus *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, and what formal fractures arise between literature that laments with devotional earnestness and literature that animates through the grotesque materiality of assemblage? It is by analyzing these varied mourning aesthetics, I argue, that contemporary Iraqi fiction takes up the ungrievable.

What necropoetic logic, has Antoon activated in *The Corpse Washer*; the logic, that is, of using literary form to register the carework, counter-sovereign intimacy and narrative disruptions of death in the scorched temporality of post-invasion Iraq? I propose here that necropoetics, itself, can be defined as an act of attunement, an attention to the way literature works to render death's presence and distance palatable, speakable and unspeakable. And in turn, I also propose, I propose to define what such literature can do to and for death and bodies that we have long assumed have been rendered beyond representation and attention. *The Corpse Washer* actively works at and within the very space of recovery, trying to keep absent Iraqi bodies alive through ritual and literary narrative.

This article explores *The Corpse Washer* as a necropoetic act, focusing on its emphasis on the materiality and aesthetics of the corpse, and interrogating how literature serves to define its political significance. I employ close reading and critical synthesis along with an attentiveness to both silence and speech to demonstrate how Antoon renders the dignity of war-damaged bodies. In contrast to the aesthetics of spectacle, resistance, or even an articulation of cause and clarity, *The Corpse Washer* embodies a more fragmented, more strange, more slow politics of care that begins where language's certitude ceases.

## ***2. Theoretical Framework: Toward a Necropoetics***

Necropolitics remains to haunt the present critical imagination as a legacy that is both explanatory and appalling. While Foucault was preoccupied with biopolitics, or the control of life; Mbembe writes of the power of the sovereign to govern death, not just in deciding who gets to live and die, but who gets to die, or even left forever somewhere between life and death (Foucault 133-59; Mbembe 11-40). But necropolitics is more than simply having power over death. Necropolitics is about creating the conditions for death to continually hover over some beings, to constitute death not as a singular moment, but as a state of being: the continuing, calculated, systemic, camouflaged presence of decomposition and elimination by which certain populations are effectively rendered null and void, surplus bodies, collateral flesh (Mbembe 11-40). The theory of necropolitics, Mbembe concludes, is about the ways in which populations are constitutive elements of the death-worlds, defined by him as regions of occupation, marginality and exclusion (Mbembe 11). There is a nuance then to this politics of death.

The state enacts slow ruin, and so works towards lives so ungrievable as to be of no consequence when they are gone (Mbembe 21-40). War is here a normal rhythm of politics, and Iraq a prime necropolitical space following the 2003 invasion: a space of unburied bodies that stands as evidence both of state failure and state efficacy (Hagopian et al. e; Hicks et al.). Mbembe's argument, framed within the theory of politics, is deeply aesthetic; death is here an issue for the sovereign, for form, for the conditions of erasure, for its looking and not looking, its blindness: death is a property in the exercise of sovereign power, and, I add, in the practice of literary inscription (Mbembe 11-40; Shams 893-909). From the politics

of necropolitics, I move to the necropoetics of literary practice: of the inscription of death, of debris, of gesture and haunting; necropoetics is form, language in death's wake where language fails (Shams 893–909): The focus of trauma theory is on disruption, on a shattering psyche; the necropoetic is concerned with residue, the corpse, the gesture, the incomplete rite (Caruth 3–24; Shams 893–909). It starts with a tenderness, even a gross material attention to what is left behind; it moves towards Mbembe's "corporeal calculus," the number of those that can be left to rot and uncounted and unburied, or disappear (Mbembe 11–40). Broadly speaking, it is ritual, corporeality, silence, and aesthetic labor that inform the necropoetic mode I outline: these categories are tones, repeated gestures of literature concerned with ongoing loss and trauma; ritual, washing, wrapping, and burial, works to reclaim the body from abstract death, from what sovereignty withholds from it (Shams 893–909; Khammas 312–31). Corporeality resists metaphor, for one is altered in bone and flesh and wound as well as in identity when one is killed (Khammas 312–31). Silence is the place of refusal, of a withholding of affirmation, of language against language (Shams 893–909).

Aesthetic labor, on the part of the writer and mourner, reclaims for itself the void (Shams 893–909). This conception of necropoetics, then, begins with Mbembe's theory but deviates in shifting from the field of political thought to literary practice; it is distinct from the Arabic *rithā'* of classical Arabic elegy, which relies on the figure of the heroically grieving king or warrior and communal continuity of loss, and actively eschews the consolations of elegy and the tropes of martyrdom (Somekh 36–81; Hamzah 159–86). Its closest kin, I argue, might be found in contemporary sha'bi resistance aesthetics and the celebration of ambivalence, fragmentation, and silence, and, in doing so, it both expands and refines

the convention of remembrance and loss in Arabic poetry (Hamzah 159–86; Shams 893–909).

A singular instance of this necropoetic tendency appears in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. In the corpse-washer (and would-be sculptor), Jawad, one discovers not an artist who mediates art and death, but one who falters and slides between them (Antoon 22; Khammas 312–31). The artist is already a figure in-between, on the verge, and this is precisely what his failed artistry highlights. His is a training that taught him to fashion form from clay, while his vocation requires him to fashion the dead: the corpses he grooms for imminent effacement (Antoon 22). His is slow, loving work, and horrific. While he does not redeem the bodies by washing them of the violence inflicted on them, by handling them, he refuses the fact that it should all disappear without trace and without any human touch (Antoon 22; Shams 893–909): “Even what we ate was paid for by death,” he says. “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” (Antoon 22). There is a dizzying intersection here between eating and an afterlife, and an eating charged by a sense of elegy. These moments are tiny disjunctions in which necropoetics may be seen as taking hold (Shams 893–909). For example, the lingering scent of soap on flesh or the surprising weight of a loaf of bread after hands have just been running over the skin of a corpse’s forehead (Antoon 22).

*The Corpse Washer* reveals, as perhaps only Mbembe gestures towards, that while sovereignty reigns over death, it cannot fully contain how the dead are remembered and mourned (Mbembe 11–40; Shams 893–909).

Antoon's novel testifies, relentlessly: even in a culture with more dead than living, with the temporary grave, with swift rites, there exists this small space for caring, for attending to the body aesthetically, and for the sustained presence before the corpse (Antoon 22; Khammas 312–31). Necropoetics is not a form of reading only, but a form of political attention (Shams 893–909). The reader is asked to tarry over the dead whom others would dismiss; to read absence as presence and literary text as an act, a ritual, a work of art that can hold the dead fully and resist the finitude that they impose (Shams 893–909).

Necropolitics, no matter how necessary, remains a schema of administration: a sovereign allocation of the fact of death, the bodies made available to violence, the territories where speech is forbidden and therefore silenced (Mbembe 11–40). But this schema touches only the surface, for it does not and cannot perceive the resonance that reverberates from within these deaths, by means of which they are borne, mourned, or resisted (Shams 893–909). Literature persists, insidiously, insistently in the conscious, where it comes and goes like that which cannot be spoken, save obliquely (Caruth 3–24; Shams 893–909). And reading death through literature places us in the zone that goes beyond necropolitics: that is, necropoetics (Mbembe 11–40; Shams 893–909). This is not supplementary discourse but a necessary mode: death, after all, is not only administered, it is experienced, reconceived, mourned, translated in a way that only affect, rupture and aesthetic estrangement may bear (Caruth 3–24; Shams 893–909).

### ***3. The Necropoetics of Labor: Washing Corpses as Ritual***

The pace of *The Corpse Washer* is the unhesitating, relentless repetition of the same gesture—that of serving the dead. His hands, reluctant, trembling, then still, are the pivot on which the book pivots: his is work by

right and by duty. He does it without longing and with resentment. Later, he learns how to keep going, to make his work an affirmation of his dignity despite the ugliness of death, until each day represents a new reaffirmation. The proximity to death becomes thicker, infecting Jawad in his dreams, his memories, and his nation, which can no longer distinguish between peace and war. The air grows thick with death; “Tenfold more than what you used to see in the span of a week now pass before me in a day or two” (Antoon 3). This desecration is threatened with overload; “It should be covered so that the hearts of the living be not hardened” (Antoon 24). Baghdad becomes the space which trains one into becoming hardened, to allow the destruction to be endlessly repeated by each new bomb, “puddles of blood, human remains, scattered shoes and slippers” (Antoon 161). The dual struggle is that of desecrating the dead and that of having no other survival to which he can appeal. This is the work of the body, the work of the spirit, the work of history, the work of inheritance; The text makes this explicitly, as he wants willing hands and hears, “Father never forgave me for straying from the path” (Antoon 79), and explicitly diagnoses the condition, “I have ended up in prison... I am imprisoned by my family and my people. I’m a prisoner of the death which has overtaken this land” (Antoon 170).

When under embargo and constraint, his artistic sensitivity fails, he was “reduced to using no more than two or three colors... Pale colors on cold and monotonous surfaces” (Antoon 79-80). Washing corpses implies its own grammar of care. His father washed his dead bodies and dried his dead carefully. When Jawad washes alone, “placed the palms of [his] hands on the dead man’s belly and rubbed gently... [and] inserted [his] index finger into his mouth and rubbed his teeth” (Antoon 129-30).

The tone of Antoon's language is responsive rather than nostalgic. The world of the corpse washer is one of humble endurance. The ritual of washing a nameless corpse, of rubbing cloth on burnt flesh, of murmuring prayers for a set of bones that will likely not be reclaimed are all activities that begin to respond to the formalizing and generalizing function of war. Even the burnt body that a driver brings who has died too recently and burned too badly to be washed is granted the simpler rite of *tayammum* (the ritual purification with sand or dry earth that allows a person who has lost their source of water to perform the necessary prayer) in response to an individual death (Antoon 145). Instead of a system that causes the dead to disappear, Jawad provides their individuality, "Most of them had no papers or IDs and no one knew their names," he records, "Instead of names, I wrote down the causes of death in my notebook" (Antoon 131). He tends, "He kept pouring water and moving his hand softly along the body, repeating: 'Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness'" (Antoon 20).

All there are the smaller acts, the lingering smell of death on the skin and the soul, "the smell overwhelmed me again... the distinct mixture of humidity, camphor, and lotus" (Antoon 125). This captures perfectly life in the center of destruction, daily and without distance for relief.

It is not by coincidence that water, with all its weight, temperature, and ritualistic importance, figures in this novel. At the mghaysil, the marble bench is sloped so that "the water could flow down" and was funneled into the garden: "for the water used for washing the dead was never to mix with sewage", thus transforming a fluid into an ethical medium (Antoon 15-16). The environment is palpable, "The scents of lotus and camphor wafted through the air, and I felt the humidity seeping into my skin" (Antoon 15). *Ghusl* is a bath of ritual cleansing and final farewell: "every dead person

will meet with the angels and the people of the afterlife and God Almighty and therefore must be pure and clean," his father states, "the origin of life is water and dust" (Antoon 25).

The corpse washer's hands keep "pouring water and moving his hand softly along the body, repeating: 'Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness'" (Antoon 19). The most unsettling scenes are the quietest, those centered on the forgotten, the unclaimed, the disposable. These bodies, killed and stripped of their stories, are the product of necropower. Washing such a body, clothing it, whispering prayers over its form: this is an act of refusal. It is a declaration: this life had significance. Now. Particularly now.

Antoon will not allow us to avert our gaze, nor to find comfort in the realm of abstractions. The body is flesh and bone, is weight: "The fire had eaten away his skin and discolored all over. Father removed his clothes with great difficulty and poured water on his corpse... I vomited that day and was sick for days" (Antoon 23-24). It is the act, the care, the labor involved in attempting to preserve something, anything, when all has been ravaged and nothing remains. This is the necropoetics of Antoon: a theology of death wherein the corpse, regardless of its condition, must be held and attended, must be worked. The washer bears witness; the washer reclaims, restores. In an era of unmarked graves and disappeared lives, this is not a trivial act.

*The Corpse Washer* presents a poetics of resistance, a poetics of care, and demonstrates this by situating the textures, rituals and the emotional cost of this act of caring. The work of Jawad creates the space where grief demands form; where memory attaches itself to the body; where the dead can still be touched, for the last time. The labor has its roots in something

far older in the choreography of Islamic burial rites. It is in the sacred tradition that *The Corpse Washer* grounds the intimacy of these acts of labor. Death can be a political event and a spiritual experience; the ritual preparation of the dead is an act of worship.

The ritual caring Jawad performs introduces a spiritual dimension into the space of thanatology; the ablution (*ghusl al-mayyit*) is a final act of love toward the deceased, an act that involves ritualistic touch, silence, and fragrant, perfumed water; the positioning of the camphor, for example, is a necessary step; as is the fold of the *kafan*. Antoon presents these gestures of love through devotional lyricism, “Here is the body of your servant who believed in you. You have taken his soul and separated the two” (Antoon 60). In the few, hushed words, we feel the weight of tradition, a tradition that reveres the departing.

Preparing the dead also engages all the senses and can thus be understood as spiritual, as sensuous. The lotus flowers, the white cloth, the cool water, the chanted prayers: “He rubbed some of it on the dead man’s forehead, nose, cheeks, chin, palms, knees, and toes, the spots that touch the ground when one prays” (Antoon 63). Each gesture imprints itself upon the body and a life that once bowed to the ground in prayer. This is the creation of a theology of touch, of an aesthetics of surrender in this practice, where submission, even the beauty found in submission, manifests in its careful precision, the precision of one who prostrates him or herself before God.

At times we witness Jawad’s doubt, weariness and at other times his sarcasm, “How could I tell her that I wasn’t totally convinced that there was such a thing as a soul?” (Antoon 65). Yet, the wash is completed, the ritual continues, “The faces and bodies of the dead would change, but the rhythm of the washing was fixed. Only rarely would it vary” (Antoon 23).

It is this continuity of tradition that grounds him, and with it, physical gestures of the deceased, such as the bound hands, that connect them to ritual practice and a framework for their afterlife. Noble intentions are important, for example; the husband is permitted to wash the body of the wife, and vice versa; as well as the mother washing the body of the son (Antoon 25). Such seemingly minor acts carry spiritual significance and also allow the body to move forward: the wrapped corpse “looked like a newborn in swaddling clothes,” and branches are placed on top “to lessen the torture of the grave” (Antoon 21-22, 65).

The religion further enriches the necropoetry. Amid the anonymous graves and forsaken bodies of the massacred, Jawad's burial ceremony functions as a holy act in protest: he remembers his dead, he commemorates his dead. His washing, wrapping, and praying become an affirmation against the indiscriminate, anonymous, and bureaucratized death—a unique form of saying goodbye. And goodbye he does say, but it is a simple goodbye, so tender it wrenches one's heart; it is a corpse held, remembered, and honored. And though the religion has collapsed, the rite remains: even as his decomposing body returns to the earth, it is met with warmth and tenderness. It is a theology practiced on the body, faith incarnated, death aesthetic born of ritual; the novel's ritual desecrates the corpses neither by neglect nor indifference, but instead reaffirms the deceased, both living and dying.

#### ***4. Art and Necropoetic Resistance***

At its core, *The Corpse Washer* is quietly undoing the assumptions that once drove Jawad's artistic imagination. The migration of Jawad from aspiring sculptor to corpse washer signifies a revolution in art practice from the durable object to the fragile body, from the public monument to

the private ritual, from art that aspires to be permanent to care that passes its disappearance. The ugliness that colonizes the Baghdad Antoon depicts persists on the scarred body. War transforms art history's materials.

Elaine Scarry clarifies how Jawad's artistic imagination turns away from abstraction once the wounded, dismembered body becomes the absolute fact of his world (Scarry 1-5). In the face of such a fact, the carving promise of form, durability, and mastery numbs before the unending arrival of the bodies that will not stay within the form. Jawad's impulse to create as an artist is oriented toward the permanent. Sculpture may allow coalescing matter into an object that may outlive both the artist and the historical violence in which he is immersed. But this impulse is less and less feasible, as death takes over our everyday reality. What can bronze do for us when the city is filled with nameless corpses? What can any artistic form preserve when the dead come and come and come before the mind can even get their names? Antoon replaces art in a different register. Jawad's art may become necropoetic, a short-term, provisional re-inscription of dignity into bodies reduced to fragments by war, rather than the turning to stone into an everlasting, symbolic object. His hands abandon clay to scrub, turn, anoint, and wrap the dead.

Jawad thinks, "I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries," only to discover that they are "conjoined, sculpting each other" (Antoon 176). The statement, in turn, overturns a definition of sculpture. It suggests a need to think of the processes of creation and decomposition as interdependent. The corpse is not simply conceived as an inert matter, but as an unstable, dead, ethically charged. It is Jawad who attends to it, not owns it as a matter. Antoon redeploys the concept of aesthetic labor, so that art is now conventionally

understood as holding in final relation the living and the dead and not simply as the making of an object.

Jawad's incomplete sculpture dedicated to his brother Ammoury complicates this problem of monumentality even more. Designed as an act of memorialization, the piece is never completed: grief, like life itself, cannot be perfectly memorialized. Jawad's inability to finish the piece takes the emphasis off the symbolic status of the dead; this inability also exposes it to the next level of critique, the giant monumentality that reduces the dead to a political icon.

Jawad's intervention complicates the literature on monumentality stated so well by W. J. T. Mitchell; he argues that monuments and public art have historically been associated with violence and conquest, with state power, and with the spectacle of the public (Mitchell 880-885). Against this potential depoliticization of death, Jawad retains profound knowledge of monumentality and tells his father, "History is a struggle of statues and monuments, Father," he says. "I will not have a share in all of this" (Antoon 157). This statement is an aesthetic and political decision that the monument is inappropriate; the monument, but not the corpse washer, is condensing the dead to symbolize public and national mourning. James E. Young's theory of the counter-monument makes clear this anti-monumental impulse. Young defines counter-monuments as memorial forms that subvert the presumption of ever-repeating acts of memorialization (Young 267-268). Jawad's work approaches this aesthetic of the monument. It is counter-monumental as corpse washing: it claims neither permanence nor visibility nor heroic mass death. It cannot get itself drawn into the symbolic. Every wash is like that; every gesture is like that. The short duration is its ethical attribute. In response to the

state's insatiability for monuments, martyrs, and history, it responds with gestures of silence and tenderness.

Antoon's prose in the same vein is subsumed within this aesthetic. It stays within catalogues of sensory experience, the mundane details of action, devoid of spectacle and wordiness. When Jawad describes a dead body to Eleanor, he says, "The sight of him reminded me of the fish my mother used to put on the kitchen table... I was curious to touch the fish's skin but felt a mixture of fascination and disgust afterward," conjuring a figure caught in an eye-opening, disgusting, and familiar act of touch (Antoon 65). This comparison is sinister because it negates the poetics of distancing that spectacular representations of violence tend to engage in. Death is contextualized in proximity with the living world. It is performed and not elaborated; reduced to the domestic, trivialities of memory and fresh skin. This is the literature of the dead, the zenoetics of presence that forgets the symbol, which is material and provocative.

Jawad is an artist of impermanence. It cannot make them tower in stone. It cannot be preoccupied to the point of ignoring the violence it seeks to replace. It endows mourning with semblance, imperfect as it is available.

Under the duress of war, art in *The Corpse Washer* operates outside the gallery, the academy, and the memorial. It persists in the ritualistic rhythm of fingers over battered bodies, in the gesture of a resistance to allow the nameless dead to slip into anonymity, and in its painfully delicate sense that even a body we are asked to bury in the earth. Antoon asserts that the art points toward death while remaining unmastered by it. No art can speak for the permanent preservation of the being of the dead. Jawad's labors mourn, refiguring death again for a moment, a gesture restoring the presence of the body's shame, fails to turn the corpse into a symbol.

### *Silence and the Unspeakable*

*The Corpse Washer* draws on silence as an intimate, material ethical presence. In the novel, silence is the condition through which death is knowable, without being taken over, as something much more than the remains of the unmoving mouth. The novel exists in the painful space between witness and silence, between the obligation to remember and the perilous ability to speak too fully on behalf of those who cannot answer back. Jawad's voice is muted rather than definitive over the dead; it "subsists" by the dead as opposed to overspeaking them. When he announces, "I cannot wake up from this endless nightmare of wakefulness," and calls the washing bench, "the bench of death" (Antoon 180), the image codifies a grammar of proximity. Jawad writes, works, and lives from within the silence of most of human life.

Because the corpses Jawad tends cannot speak. They are ironically voiceless, featureless, separate from speech, alive or dead. Antoon rejects the solace, though there is any in narrative recuperation, of imagining overdetermined, totally delivered stories for them. Craps and Buelens argue that trauma studies need to account for how easily the field has side-stepped the course of highlighting Western inheritance of trauma, of denying that we have our own histories of violence to plow through (Craps and Buelens 1-5). In this way, Antoon's neutrality avoids translating Iraqi death into a trauma story consumable by only external trauma-studies audiences. Difficult, elusive dead remain; impossible.

His task of washing sustains dignity but does not restore voice. The presence of an anonymous body's arrival, for example, does not diminish the body's claim to ritual or care but heightens the call upon Jawad to uphold it. The novel defiantly chooses not to allow silence to disappear.

All the body washing is a witnessing that does not demand speech. Kelly Oliver theorizes witnessing as a modality of ethically responsible response that accounts for this: to witness ethically is a response that calls the other to sustain relation and responsibility, and is not a response of recognition from a place of ideological authority (Oliver 473-480). This is defined by Jawad as his absence of speech: he can refuse their erasure. Antoon's prose is lean. The novel shuttles among revelation, confession, and catharsis; Antoon's sentences stall, hesitate, or subtly regress. Dream-visions foil chronology; memories resurface with gaps; grisly descriptions of the dead function between hyperrealism and dream. As Jawad dreams of Reem in a pomegranate grove and cannot hear either his voice or his footsteps, silence is both the absent presence of grief and its residue (Antoon 225). There, Reem remains silent but present. The dream visualizes grief without co-opting it into a conclusion. Silence is the guise grief wears where speech is too definitive, too autocratic, or too banal.

Finally, *The Corpse Washer* distinguishes itself from each of these spectacular images of war in this self-restraint. In numerous images of violence circulating through the public, mediated by visual images of empire- watching spectatorship, the wound becomes testimony, evidence, ambassador, and instigation. Antoon refuses that visual economy. Feldman teaches us what it means for political violence to be fixed within frameworks of sight, representation, and bodily presentation where vision might become enmeshed with domination (24-60).

Antoon's text defies this domination by such spectacle. The corpse is not on display because it must lose its spectacle. It is washed, touched, and prepared. The reader is not invited to oversee. While Jawad's story fails to turn the horrors of Iraq into a spectacle of foreign commiseration, the bodies in the *mghaysil* are certainly not stand-ins for a moral discourse

---

about war. They are not emptied of difference through their inclusion in a heroic song of remembrance; they are flattened by their very presence, their grit, their enormity, “Bodies whose names had been stolen by violence” (Antoon 91) are remembered with reverence, not revealed in a heroic song of remembrance. Antoon’s necropoetics leans heavily on an ethics of limit; the practice of witnessing the dead is not necessarily to “own” the meaning of the dead, just as mourning is not necessarily to “own” the meaning of the dead. The reality of their violence must be safeguarded against the very forces which reduced it to idolatry and a need to see.

Even Jawad’s own voice cowers in the face of this warrant. He speaks for the novel, for the narration that the novel demands; his speech, however, stumbles over what it cannot mend, “Every time I wash a corpse,” Jawad confesses, “I feel as if a little part of me has died” (Antoon 92). The words reveal the toll of having seen through seeing, his grief makes its way into his hands and his sleep and his breath and, finally, his own body. Speaking begets silence: they do not talk back, the dead; we, the living, are unsure whether we are believing anything of the utterance itself. But Antoon transforms speech’s loss into a practice of ethical vigilance, the refuse of a redemptive narrative of trauma or media frenzy, the constitution of state-inflicted deaths in that particular manner. It is through Jawad’s dwelling over the body and his ritual of washing the corpse, without the imposition of a frame that understands its otherness, that this corpse achieves its significance, this otherness that he washes over and cannot comprehend. Corpse-washer’s mourning without ownership, he is responsible to, not an interpreter of the dead.

No statue, in this region of the narrative's moral cosmos; no testimony, triumphant over destruction, no absolute redemption for the annihilation that violence engenders. There is only Jawad and his hands and the bench and water and silence that envelopes the bodies that arrive for his cleaning. That silence remains, to preserve the dead from their reduction to symbols—the last refuge in which they alone can maintain immunity.

#### 6. Necropoetics in Iraqi Fiction: A Comparative Study

The framing of Sinan Antoon's elegy by the posthumous unveiling of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Ahmed Saadawi) only buttresses the necropoetic undertones of the novel. Antoon and Saadawi, at diametrically opposed ends in terms of tone, genre and form, express a convergence in their interest of the cadaver, and thus in two major, ascendant necropoetics in the literary field in Iraq post-2003. Saadawi draws on gothic excess, magical realism, and absurdist allegorical devices, while Antoon relies on shrouding aestheticism in ritualistic contortion, poetical contraction, and personal lament. Yet, both authors approach the same tale of a looming moral dilemma: what story opens, and what story is asked to open, when the dead are no longer exceptional, when the corpse emerges as a determinative matter of the national condition?

Saadawi's "Whatsitsname" exemplifies the demonized body. Built from the body parts of Baghdad's civilian war victims, the creature emerges from the chaos of war as both victim and avenger (Saadawi). Annie Webster moves beyond the creature as a metaphor to the "medical logic" of the body's composition, documenting Saadawi's use of Iraqi civilian victims to unmask the disparities of body vulnerability in the Iraq conflict (Webster 439-445). The body of the Whatsitsname is one subject to archive, each limb memorial to a death that would otherwise be

anesthetized, integrated, and forgotten. Saadawi's necropoetics diverges from Antoon's.

The corpse in Baghdad is not willing to be still. It is put together again, brought to life, and returned to the city as an impossibility of justice. The Whatsitsname stands for the dead when it remade a dispersion of parts into one body, calling for revenge. That calling-for is not stable for long. The monster was born in turning injustice into retaliation, but finding replacements for itself will ensure its enslavement to the cycle of violence it is born to combat. As the monster's body is not whole, so the violence of Iraq is never whole; for vengeance, another corpse, another missing piece, another claim to justice.

Dom Davies makes explicit the political mobility of this bodily instability, analyzing Saadawi's novel through the correspondence between the breakdown of city, body, and storytelling to illustrate ways in which the body parts assume biopolitical meaning and how stories use bodies and city structures (Davies 922-930). Saadawi envisions the corpse as a hybrid political body; Baghdad is hybridized by explosives, rumors, sectarian identities, state collapse, and remains. The city is interrelated with the decomposition of the body and the decomposition of the story (Davies 937).

Antoon's body moves in the other direction. Saadawi makes corpses move, allegories of indictment, all blood and guilt; Antoon restores them to their most trembling flesh. The corpses in *The Corpse Washer* are inert, unnamed, devastated, just a body to be nursed one more time by the living. Jawad prepared the corpse. He talked to it, howled into it, watched and waited, baptizing it with rituals, slow and the same every time, flowing water, towels, soap, finger and breath, prayer. When he says, "I feel as if

a little part of me has died” (Antoon 92), it is the body of mourning, not its manifestation, that he becomes close to.

The two novels differ in the ways each responds to the corpse. Saadawi asks what happens when the dead come back to claim justice; Antoon wonders what happens when the dead have no voice to come back with. For Saadawi, the corpse utters; for Antoon, the corpse enforces silence. Dismemberment yields monstrous agency for one account, ritual humility for the other. One corpse is an icon of revolt, the other a trust. Neither text lets the dead be subsumed into abstraction.

But it is Abir Hamdar’s treatment of the missing corpse in present-day Iraqi fiction that interests me as a co-textured response to this common anxiety. Hamdar describes the dead body that is missing or absent as an “absent presence,” whose visual traces persist as remnants, substitutes, repetition, and surrogates (Hamdar 957-965). These insights reveal the functioning of each novel even as they stage absence differently. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* makes up for the missing body through grotesque substitution, collecting the absent bodies into one impossible body. *The Corpse Washer* responds to absence through ritual care and the releasing of the body without substitution, allegory, or wholeness. Saadawi fills the absence with return into monstrousness; Antoon with refusal to fill it. Aesthetic modes reaffirm this difference.

Saadawi’s text opens into a gothic work, and rumor and investigation and foreclosed excess, producing a Baghdad that is chaotic, polyphonic, unfixing a city that necessarily subverts the meaning of the streets with competing tales. Antoon’s text focuses on the flat, silent, elegiac pressure of gestural prose. The *mghaysil* becomes the theatre of meaning, replacing the street; water, camphor, and fabric, silence, and the heaviness of a body resting on the washing bench take the place of explosions, police reports,

and popular riot. In other words, the grotesquery of Saadawi's style reveals the absurdity of an universe in which death is enacted as justice; the stillness of Antoon's prose keeps alive the option for care.

The two books share a common concern: attention. Neither is capable of pulling the viewer's eyes from the corpse. Neither admits that death of Iraqis could be reduced to data, spectacle, or politics. Saadawi responds with activity: the corpses speak as one body that indicts the world that built it. Antoon responds with ritual: water. One makes the corpse active, the other inanimate but attentive to ethics. One claims dismemberment as accusation; the other makes the ritual of washing, an ethical bearing witness.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* questions the possibility of justice in a legal world; *The Corpse Washer* questions whether ritual itself can be justice—the ritual of refused forgetfulness, a refusal to elide the dismembered body and accept the nameless. The two books establish a necropoetics that defines contemporary Iraqi literature; the core tenet of the necropoetic tradition is the need for endurance with the dead and a commitment to drawing care from fragments, not wholeness.

### **7. Conclusion**

Necropoetics takes on a feel, a kind of literary response not of overcoming but attending; it is that we listen to the literature of its absence. Through the somber, unhurried rhythm of *The Corpse Washer* Sinan Antoon excavates death as a site of ethical labor and aesthetic salvage. That is, what is left over after death has done its work, and who are the ones that labor in order to work on those things left behind. With necropolitics in tow, translating it to the sphere of literature, *The Corpse Washer* is not a departure away from domination by death but away from

the domination by death towards that it is an issue of unfinished resistance. Jawad the once sculptor of life, the now washer of the dead has blurred the boundaries of art and mourning, creation and care. Jawad's cadaver is full of resistance to narrative; it must be cleaned, wrapped and dressed. The repeated, quiet, intimate and horrifying gesture of washing a corpse, then, provides Antoon a space to insert a narrative, to counter the narrative of nationalism and militarism, for memory is touch. Antoon's writing also reflects this ethos. The language itself stutters, falls, breaks with no aspiration to rise. Its silence is its attention, and while western war narratives turn toward ending, the event of catharsis or redemption Antoon's novel retreats from that terrain.

While Saadawi's fragmented creation speaks, roams, and indicts, Jawad's corpses lay inert. While Saadawi gives voice to the shattered bodies and individual suffering, Antoon listens to the unspoken ones. The two works show contrasting vocabularies for engaging with the dead, vocabularies much stranger and much more urgent than any talk of resolution can achieve.

As a creative practice functioning alongside and against the machinations of necropolitics, there is no escape for the artist to write of death from its proximity. This novel does not offer catharsis, testament, or testimony. Instead, it offers care, repetition, a hand on a shattered body, a murmured prayer, and an incomplete sculpture. By refusing to memorialize, *The Corpse Washer* demonstrates the profound revolutionary potential of attention: mourners without mastery, remembrance without illusion. Necropoetics yields a literature of being-with: writing with the dead. *The Corpse Washer* emerges from the company of the dead. It does not abandon the dead to their final disappearance unheld.

---

**Works Cited**

- Antoon, Sinan. *The Corpse Washer*. Yale University Press, 2013.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Craps, Stef, and Gert Buelens. "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, nos. 1–2, 2008, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.0.0008>.
- Davies, Dominic. "Concrete Stories, Decomposing Fictions: Body Parts and Body Politics in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2021, pp. 922–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1816851>.
- Feldman, Allen. "Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror." *Public Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1997, pp. 24–60. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-10-1-24>.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1990.
- Hagopian, Amy, et al. "Mortality in Iraq Associated with the 2003–2011 War and Occupation: Findings from a National Cluster Sample Survey by the University Collaborative Iraq Mortality Study." *PLOS Medicine*, vol. 10, no. 10, 2013, e1001533. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001533>.
- Hamdar, Abir. "The Missing Corpse in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Muhsin Al-Ramli's *Daughter of the Tigris*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 65, no. 5, 2024, pp. 957–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2023.2269833>.

- Hamzah, Hussain. "Resistance, Martyrdom and Death in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry." *Holy Land Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2014, pp. 159–86. <https://doi.org/10.3366/hls.2014.0088>.
- Hicks, Madelyn Hsiao-Rei, et al. "Violent Deaths of Iraqi Civilians, 2003–2008: Analysis by Perpetrator, Weapon, Time, and Location." *PLOS Medicine*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2011, e1000415. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000415>.
- Isakjee, Faiza. "Death, Burial, and Belonging in Diaspora." *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2021, pp. 515–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1628900>.
- Kadhim, Abbas. *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*. University of Texas Press, 2012.
- Khammas, Hanan Jasim. "Corporeality in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction." *452°F: Journal of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature*, no. 27, 2022, pp. 312–31. <https://doi.org/10.1344/452f.2022.27.17>.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "The Violence of Public Art: 'Do the Right Thing.'" *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1990, pp. 880–99. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448565>.
- Oliver, Kelly. "Witnessing, Recognition, and Response Ethics." *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2015, pp. 473–93. <https://doi.org/10.5325/philrheth.48.4.0473>.
- Saadawi, Ahmed. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Translated by Jonathan Wright, Penguin Books, 2018.
- Scarry, Elaine. "Injury and the Structure of War." *Representations*, no. 10, 1985, pp. 1–51. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.1985.10.1.99p0402z>.

- Shams, Fatemeh. "Dialogues with the Dead: Necropoetics of Zahra's Paradise." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 53, nos. 5–6, 2020, pp. 893–909. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1689809>.
- Somekh, S. "The Neo-Classical Arabic Poets." *Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by M. M. Badawi, Cambridge UP, 1993, pp. 36–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521331975.003>.
- Webster, Annie. "Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: A Tale of Biomedical Salvation?" *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2019, pp. 439–63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2018.0022>.
- Young, James E. "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1992, pp. 267–96. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448632>.