University of Tehran press

Research in Contemporary World Literature

http//jor.ut.ac.ir, Email: 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

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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

The Corpse Washer (2013) by Sinan Antoon explores the intersections of resistance, memory, and mortality in post-invasion Iraq from the perspective of Jawad, an artist who has become a corpse washer. In contrast to prior research that has examined the novel through trauma theory, existentialism, and postcolonial critique, this paper introduces necropoetics, a theoretical framework that connects Achille Mbembe's necropolitics (the power to orchestrate death) with literary aesthetics, to investigate how Antoon stylizes death as both a political act and a narrative story. The novel transforms Jawad's grim vocation into a site of artistic defiance against the erasure of Iraqi lives by emphasizing the ritualized labor of washing corpses. This study contends that necropoetics, as a lens, demonstrates how Antoon's prose resists the commodification of war trauma, instead portraying death as a subversive, intimate practice that challenges state-sanctioned violence and historical amnesia. The Corpse Washer is not merely a chronicle of loss; it is also a literary act of preservation and dissent, as a result of this approach.

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

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: http//doi.org/ 10.22059/jor.2025.395118.2641

1. Introduction

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) does not simply narrate death; it dwells within its shadow. It is a novel of thresholds: between dream and waking, ritual and ruin, the body remembered and the body erased. Centered on Jawad, a once-hopeful sculptor who inherits the profession of washing corpses for burial, the story resists the linear logic of trauma and instead offers something more oblique and intimate: a sustained elegy for a life lived amid the machinery of death.

Jawad's Baghdad is not merely broken; it is hollowed by decades of war, sanctions, and sectarian fracture. Yet the novel does not stage this destruction through spectacle. Rather, it lets it seep in slowly, through fragments, dreams, and the residue of memory. Death in this world is not an event but a structure. "Death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours," Jawad confesses. "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). In such moments, tender and exhausted and disoriented, the novel does not describe violence so much as breathe in it.

Antoon's narrative architecture mirrors this dislocation. The story moves in fits and starts, across a shattered timeline, slipping without warning from the real to the surreal. The disorientation is not decorative; it is formal testimony to the psychological ruin it charts. In a recurring nightmare, Jawad sees himself beheaded, watching helplessly as his beloved Reem is taken by masked men: "I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood" (Antoon 2). Here, even the body's boundaries give way. Time collapses, and mourning becomes indistinguishable from madness.

At the novel's core lies a bitter irony: Jawad, who longed to sculpt life into form, finds himself returning each day to death's raw material. His failed artistic aspiration is not incidental but emblematic of the paralyzed

potential that pervades post-invasion Iraq. "My heart," he says, "is an abandoned house whose windows are shattered and doors unhinged. Ghosts play inside it, and the winds wail" (Antoon 3). His grief is not only emotional but architectural: his inner life is in ruins.

And yet, within this landscape of decomposition, something flickers, not quite hope but not despair either. In the labor of washing the dead, Antoon offers a gesture that resists erasure. Jawad's work becomes a kind of necropoetic practice: an art form for the dead and in defiance of a state that would prefer their disappearance. The novel neither romanticizes this labor nor reduces it to symbol. Instead, it attends to its textures—the weight of a lifeless limb, the silence of a rinsed mouth—as if to insist that this, too, is a kind of art.

Scholarship has often framed Antoon's work through trauma theory, existentialism, and postcolonial critique (Isakjee; Kadhim). These readings provide useful maps but tend to circle around Jawad's psychological rupture or the ethics of suffering without fully engaging the material and aesthetic dimensions of the corpse. This article proposes another path: one that takes seriously the poetics of death. These elisions are not simple gaps in criticism; they open apertures through which entangled inquiries emerge, questions that displace explanatory certainty in favor of conceptual agitation.

In what ways does *The Corpse Washer* enact a necropoetic grammar, reconfiguring Achille Mbembe's theorization of necropolitics into a literary idiom that renders death not as terminality but as a site of care, interruption, and counter-sovereign intimacy within the spectral landscape of post-invasion Iraq? How does the novel's formal attention to ritual gesture, to the viscerality of the corpse, to silence as both threshold and

excess, trouble the teleologies of trauma theory and the narrative sovereignty presumed in some modes of postcolonial critique? And further, how do necropoetic operations diverge across *The Corpse Washer* and *Frankenstein in Baghdad*? What aesthetic and ethical ruptures emerge when one text mourns through liturgical intimacy and the other animates through grotesque assemblage? Such divergences disclose competing epistemologies of mass death, attesting to the plural and dissonant strategies by which contemporary Iraqi fiction confronts the debris field of the ungrievable.

This article asks not only how Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* represents death but how it mobilizes necropoetics, an aesthetic and political mode that fuses Mbembe's theory of necropolitics with literary form, to reconfigure death not as closure but as a site of resistant intimacy, carework, and narrative defiance within the scorched temporality of post-invasion Iraq. Necropoetics here is less a theory than an attunement: to the ways literature renders death both present and bearable, both unspeakable and spoken. It asks how language shapes the dead not just in memory but in form. In this light, Antoon's novel does not merely mourn Iraq's lost bodies; it labors to preserve them through ritual, narrative, and art.

Thus, this study engages *The Corpse Washer* not only as a fictional archive of violence but as a necropoetic intervention into it. Through close reading, theoretical synthesis, and attention to silence as much as speech, I explore how Antoon inscribes dignity onto those cast aside by war's machinery. This is not mourning as spectacle nor resistance as clarity. It is slower, stranger, more fractured: a politics of care that begins where language begins to fray.

2. Theoretical Framework: Toward a Necropoetics

Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics lingers in the contemporary critical imagination like a difficult inheritance: at once clarifying and haunting. Where Michel Foucault spoke of biopolitics and the governance of life, Mbembe turns, more darkly, to sovereignty as the power to administer death: to decide not simply who may live but who must die, or worse still, who will be left to drift in the long twilight of living death. This is not only the power to kill, but to orchestrate conditions under which death is ambient, slow, structural, disavowed. It is a form of rule that transforms certain lives into expendable matter, surplus flesh, collateral weight. "Necropolitics," as Mbembe frames it, names the logic by which entire populations are consigned to what he calls death-worlds: zones of abandonment, containment, and exposure (Mbembe 11).

Yet there is something quieter, more insinuating in this logic than the bombast of spectacle suggests. The state does not merely slay; it decomposes. It does not only erase but renders certain lives so radically ungrievable that their disappearance hardly registers as loss. In this schema, war is not an exceptional condition; it is the rhythm of governance. Iraq, particularly in the smoldering wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion, becomes a paradigmatic necropolitical space: a geography littered with the unburied, where bodies accumulate not as historical trace but as evidence of state failure, or worse, its success.

Mbembe's vision, though cast in political theory, strains toward the aesthetic. Death here is not just a matter of sovereign force; it is also a question of form, of how disappearance is orchestrated, how it is seen, or how visibility is refused altogether. This study moves, then, from necropolitics to necropoetics: a conceptual reframing that attends not only

to the politics of death but to its representation, its residue, its staging, its erasures and traces in literature. Necropoetics does not offer resolution; it offers form. Not a language about death, but a language after death: a language that persists where speech breaks down.

Where trauma theory has often attended to rupture—the psyche overwhelmed, the self shattered—necropoetics turns its gaze toward what remains: the corpse, the gesture, the unfinished ritual. It does not begin with healing but with tending. In this sense it is deeply material, concerned less with metaphor than with what Mbembe calls "corporeal calculus": the statistics of who may rot in the open, who may be counted, who buried, who disappeared.

Four elements, loosely gathered, shape the necropoetic register I propose: ritual, corporeality, silence, and aesthetic labor. These are not categories so much as tonalities, recurring gestures in literature that grapples with the aftermath of unending violence. Ritual recovers the body from abstraction through washing, wrapping, and burial, restoring to it the dignity sovereignty would deny. Corporeality resists metaphor, reminding us that to be killed is also to be altered in flesh, bone, wound. Silence becomes not an absence of meaning but a charged field of refusal, where narration falters not because there is nothing to say, but because some things press against language's edge. Aesthetic labor, whether the writer's or the mourner's, reclaims, even in fragments, what the state would render blank.

While necropoetics, as theorized here, extends from Mbembe's political theory into a literary register, it also diverges from classical Arabic traditions of mourning and elegy (rithāʾ), which often emphasize heroic lamentation or communal continuity. Antoon's approach avoids both the mythologizing of martyrdom and the consolatory structure of

traditional elegy, aligning more closely with contemporary shaʿbi resistance aesthetics that privilege ambiguity, fragmentation, and silence. In this sense, *The Corpse Washer* participates in, but also reconfigures, Arab literary modes of grief and remembrance.

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* emerges as a singular instantiation of this necropoetic sensibility. In Jawad, the reluctant corpse-washer and failed sculptor, we encounter a figure who does not bridge art and death so much as oscillate uneasily between them. His life is a threshold: between making and unmaking, form and formlessness. Trained to shape the human form in clay, Jawad instead shapes the dead, preparing their bodies for final disappearance. His work is intimate, methodical, and devastatingly lyrical. In washing the bodies others have maimed, he does not redeem them but refuses to let them vanish without care: "Even what we ate was paid for by death," he reflects. "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). The line does not merely juxtapose life and death; it entangles them. The mundane act of eating becomes charged with afterlife; nourishment is touched by elegy. It is in these small dissonances—the smell of soap clinging to skin, the weight of bread in hands that earlier held a skull—that Antoon's necropoetics takes root.

What *The Corpse Washer* reveals, and what Mbembe perhaps only gestures toward, is that sovereignty may dominate death, but it cannot fully control how the dead are remembered or mourned. Antoon's prose insists on this: that even in a society where the dead outnumber the living, where graves are provisional and rituals rushed, there remains a fragile space for care, aesthetic attention, and the deliberate act of seeing the corpse.

Necropoetics, then, is not only a mode of reading but a politics of attention. It asks us to linger with the body others would erase, to hear silence as more than lack, and to read literature not simply as witness but as work: ritual work, aesthetic work, labor that might hold death in its fullness and, in doing so, refuse its finality.

Necropolitics, however indispensable, remains a schema of administration: the sovereign's apportionment of death, the exposure of bodies to violence, the zoning of silence where speech is interdicted. Yet such a schema halts at the surface, for it cannot register the inward vibrations by which these deaths are borne, remembered, or resisted. Literature, by contrast, abides, insinuates, and presses upon consciousness with the persistence of what cannot be spoken except obliquely. To read death through narrative is to enter what exceeds necropolitics, and this excess I call necropoetics. It is not an auxiliary discourse but a necessity, for death is not only imposed; it is endured, refigured, mourned, and transposed into forms that only affect, interruption, and aesthetic estrangement are capable of sustaining.

3. The Necropoetics of Labor: Washing Corpses as Ritual

At the heart of *The Corpse Washer* lies a rhythm: one not bound by narrative arc or plot progression but by the steady, unrelenting return of the same gesture, the act of tending to the dead. Jawad's hands, at first uncertain, resistant, trembling, become the quiet axis around which the novel turns. His is not the labor of choice, nor of aspiration. It is inherited, imposed, reluctant. Yet over time it becomes something else, something more difficult to name. Not acceptance, nor transcendence, but perhaps a kind of ethical persistence, a daily insistence on dignity amid decay.

Death, in Antoon's rendering, ceases to be an interruption; it thickens the air and weighs upon every interval of Jawad's existence, whether in

the spectral persistence of dreams, the stubborn grip of memory, or the relentless reiteration of a nation that has forgotten what it is to distinguish between war and peace. Death is no longer the climactic event but the constant atmosphere: "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). Even the sacred office of washing the corpse is haunted by the danger that reverence itself will erode into habit: "It should be covered so that the hearts of the living be not hardened" (24). Yet Baghdad becomes the great instructor in hardening, rehearsing with each explosion the ritual spectacle of ruin: "puddles of blood, human remains, scattered shoes and slippers" (161). The true wound is double: the dread that numbness profanes the dead, and the recognition that numbness is the only resource left to keep the living alive.

His labor, then, is not only physical but emotional, historical, and inherited. The novel frames this inheritance explicitly: "in washing bodies, volition is crucial," a lesson Jawad hears even as "Father never forgave me for straying from the path" (79). Later he names the bind more starkly: "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" (170). His ambition to sculpt flickers and dims under embargo and necessity; instead of canvases, he is "reduced to using no more than two or three colors… Pale colors on cold and monotonous surfaces" (79–80).

Yet the corpse washer's work is not merely mechanical, nor is it without form. The ritual traces a grammar of care. In his father's hands, washing is "without harshness," and the dead are "carefully dried" and prepared with attention (20–21). When Jawad washes on his own, he "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," murmuring, "Forgiveness, O Lord" (129–30).

Antoon's language does not romanticize this labor or ennoble suffering. What it offers instead is attention. The corpse washer's world is not one of grand resistance but of fragile endurance. To wash a nameless body, to press cloth to burned flesh, to recite prayers over bones that will not be claimed—these become rituals that resist the abstraction of war. When a driver arrives with an "anonymous" body burned beyond washing, Jawad can offer only tayammum, a pared-down rite that nonetheless acknowledges a singular life (145). In a system designed to erase the dead, Jawad insists on their specificity: "Most of them had no papers or IDs and no one knew their names," he writes; "Instead of names, I wrote down the causes of death in my notebook" (131). Their care is exacting rather than sentimental: "He kept pouring water and moving his hand softly along the body, repeating: 'Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness'" (20).

There is no catharsis, no redemption arc. Only the slow accumulation of gestures, the way death clings not only to the skin but to the soul. Even the place of washing seems to hold on to what happens there: returning after an absence, he finds "the smell overwhelmed me again… the distinct mixture of humidity, camphor, and lotus" (125). This is not redemption; it is a description of what it means to live in proximity to obliteration, day after day, without retreat.

The novel's attention to water—its weight, its temperature, its ritual force—is no accident. In the mghaysil, the marble bench is sloped so "the water could flow down," and the runoff is routed into the garden, "for the water used for washing the dead was never to mix with sewage," turning element into ethical medium (15–16). Even its atmosphere is tactile: "The scents of lotus and camphor wafted through the air, and I felt the humidity

seeping into my skin" (15). In Islamic practice, ghusl is both purification and farewell; as Jawad's father teaches, "every dead person will meet with the angels and the people of the afterlife and God Almighty and therefore must be pure and clean" (25). He roots that charge in first principles: "the origin of life is water and dust," which is why pure earth may substitute when water is absent (25). In this light, the corpse washer's hands become both aesthetic and sacred: he keeps "pouring water and moving his hand softly along the body," murmuring, "Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness" (19).

Perhaps the most haunting scenes in the novel are not the moments of violence but the quiet, methodical attention given to those who have no one left to remember them: the unclaimed, the forgotten, the discarded. These are the bodies produced by necropower—not only killed but stripped of story. To wash such a body, to dress it, to whisper prayers over it, is to enact a form of refusal. It is a ritual that says: this life mattered. Even now. Especially now.

Antoon does not let us look away. He does not allow the reader the comfort of abstraction. The corpse is not symbol; it is skin, bone, 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" (23–24). What lingers is not the horror but the effort, the care, the labor required to preserve some shard of dignity when everything else has been lost.

This, then, is Antoon's necropoetics: not the beautification of death, but the insistence that death, even in its most brutal forms, must still be held, tended to, shaped. The corpse washer is not an artist in the conventional sense. He does not create; he witnesses, he restores, he refuses to let the

body become invisible. In a world of mass graves and vanishing names, this refusal is no small act.

By aestheticizing this labor, not by making it beautiful but by rendering its textures, its rituals, its psychic costs, *The Corpse Washer* offers a poetics of resistance grounded in care. Jawad's gestures, repeated again and again across the novel, do not redeem the world, but they mark the space where grief insists on form, where memory takes hold of the body, and where the dead are touched, one last time, by the living.

This labor, Jawad's quiet, repetitive tending to the dead, is born of violence, shaped by it, scarred by it. But it is also tethered to something older, something that predates the chaos of war: the theological choreography of Islamic burial rites. Even as the novel mourns a nation undone by occupation and erasure, it roots its most intimate gestures in a sacred tradition that endures. Within *The Corpse Washer*, death is not only a political condition; it is a spiritual passage. And the act of preparing the dead is rendered not as mechanical duty but as liturgy.

Jawad's role, then, extends beyond the necropoetic. It enters the domain of thanatology, where ritual washing, *ghusl al-mayyit*, is more than cleansing. It is a final expression of love, a farewell performed not in words but in touch, in silence, in fragrant water. In the Islamic tradition, the body must be purified before it meets its Lord. This purification is not symbolic; it is exacting. It matters where the camphor touches, how the shroud is folded. Antoon captures this devotion with reverent lyricism: "Here is the body of your servant who believed in you. You have taken his soul and separated the two" (60). These murmured lines, spoken by Jawad's father, carry the weight of centuries. They are not just phrases; they are echoes of a tradition that sanctifies departure.

The preparation of the dead, *ghusl*, *kafan*, and prayer, is as much a sensory act as it is spiritual. The lotus leaves, the white cloth, the coolness of water, the whispered recitations: "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 becomes a trace of the life once lived, a life that bent in prayer toward the earth. In this, Antoon gives form to what might otherwise vanish: a theology of touch, an aesthetic of surrender. The beauty of submission lies in its precision, its humility before the divine.

Jawad does not always believe. His doubt is palpable, sometimes weary, sometimes fierce: "How could I tell her that I wasn't totally convinced that there was such a thing as a soul?" (65). And yet the rituals remain: "The faces and bodies of the dead would change, but the rhythm of the washing was fixed. Only rarely would it vary" (23). They persist beyond belief, binding his hands into memory and care, guided by instruction rather than metaphor: "The important thing… was to be possessed of noble intentions," and "a husband may wash his wife… A mother may wash her son" (25). Even the smallest gestures mark the passage toward what follows: the shrouded body "looked like a newborn in swaddling clothes," and branches are placed "to lessen the torture of the grave" (21–22, 65).

This religious dimension is not separate from the novel's necropoetic force; it deepens it. Against the backdrop of unmarked graves and discarded bodies, Jawad's work becomes a sacramental defiance. He does not allow the dead to vanish nameless. He does not allow the rituals to be forgotten. His washing, his wrapping, his prayers, all of it resists the logic

of mass death and bureaucratic indifference. He offers no spectacle, only farewell.

That farewell is not theatrical. It is quiet, heavy with care. In his hands, the corpse is not reduced to matter; it is held, honored, remembered. Even as his faith flickers, the practice endures. The body, even in decomposition, is met with tenderness. Jawad's hands become vessels for something more than custom. They enact what might be called a corporeal theology: belief not as doctrine but as form, a poetics of death shaped not by answers but by ritual fidelity.

In this way, Antoon's novel does not simply document death; it consecrates it. And in doing so, it refuses to let even the most broken bodies pass into silence unmarked. Each act of preparation becomes a gesture of remembrance, of resistance, of love.

4. Art and Necropoetic Resistance

At the center of *The Corpse Washer* lies a quiet undoing: not of art itself, but of what art once meant to its maker. Jawad's journey from aspiring sculptor to professional corpse washer is not, as it first appears, a fall from grace or a failure of vocation. It is a migration of form, a dislocation of aesthetics under pressure. It is what happens when the material of beauty, stone, bronze, abstraction, crumbles under the weight of blood, silence, and severed limbs. In a nation so thick with the dead that mourning becomes a civic condition, Antoon does not abandon the artistic. He repositions it. He asks: What becomes of art when its subject is not the eternal, but the ephemeral? When its canvas is not the gallery wall, but the chilled slab of the corpse washer's table?

Jawad's story, then, might be read as an alternate künstlerroman, a coming-of-age narrative in which the artist does not find his voice but is forced to revise it, again and again, against the grain of death. In the

context of contemporary Iraq, and more broadly the Arab world, this arc does not follow the familiar Western script of artistic emancipation. Creativity here does not unfurl in isolation; it is shaped, constrained, and redirected by the intersecting forces of family, religion, occupation, and grief. As Zaarour et al. suggest, the Arab diasporic künstlerroman is often less about arriving at one's art than about negotiating the ruins through which art must pass or persist.

In the early chapters, Jawad's sculptural ambitions cling to ideals of permanence: form, expression, the allure of something that might outlast its maker. But as war tears through Iraq, as bodies pile up with no names and fewer mourners, the logic of sculpture falters. What can one do with bronze when the streets themselves bleed? What good is permanence when death erases faster than art can record? In this void, Antoon does not mourn the failure of art. He reframes it. Aesthetics in *The Corpse Washer* is not abandoned; it is unmoored from the monumental and reanchored in the everyday, the tactile, the tender. Jawad's work becomes necropoetic: not the shaping of material into symbolic form, but the care of bodies rendered unrepresentable.

To wash the dead, to anoint them, to wrap their wounds in silence—these become Jawad's new media. The corpse itself becomes both subject and site of aesthetic attention. Unlike the sculptor's material, this body resists fixity: it decomposes, it leaks, it speaks in its silence. "I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries," Jawad confesses. "But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other" (Antoon 176). In this inversion, creation and decomposition are no longer opposites; they are collaborators. Each

gesture of care becomes an unspoken sculpture, shaped not to last but to witness.

Nowhere is this transformation more legible than in Jawad's unfinished sculpture for his brother, Ammoury. Intended as a commemorative act, it fails not because of lack of skill or vision, but because of something more troubling: the impossibility of closure. In a necropolitical landscape, even grief resists resolution. Jawad's abandonment of the sculpture becomes a refusal to monumentalize death, to participate in the mythmaking machinery of the state. "History is a struggle of statues and monuments, Father," he says. "I will not have a share in all of this" (157). Instead, his art migrates into gesture, into care, into fleeting rituals of intimate resistance. If monuments flatten, his labor attends; if nationalism aestheticizes, he unravels.

Antoon furthers this necropoetic vision not only through content but through texture. His prose lingers and hesitates. It renders decay not with spectacle but with restraint. When Jawad recalls washing a corpse, he likens the memory not to horror but to something achingly mundane: "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" (65). There is no flourish here, no romanticism. Only the strange intimacy of death as something both familiar and unknowable, something that clings to the skin long after it is gone.

This aesthetic of attention, of absence, resonates with a wider visual language emerging from post-2003 Iraqi art. Artists like Wafaa Bilal and Ahmed Al Bahrani, working in exile and amid ruins, return again and again to the body: dismembered, emptied, anonymized. Their works, like Antoon's novel, resist the grand narratives of war or martyrdom. Instead,

they offer absences, silences, unfinished gestures: testimonies not to victory, but to what has been lost. Like Jawad, they sculpt what cannot be sculpted. They mourn what official memory erases.

What emerges from this necropoetic ethos is not despair but a kind of ethical insistence. Jawad does not give up on art; he revises it. He transfigures it. Where once he sought to shape beauty, he now enacts care. His hands no longer model permanence; they cradle what will soon disappear. And this, perhaps, is Antoon's most radical aesthetic claim: that art, under conditions of necropower, does not preserve the dead. It attends to them. It does not monumentalize; it mourns. It does not redeem. But it refuses to look away.

5. Silence and the Unspeakable

A defining gesture of *The Corpse Washer* is its sustained engagement with absence, not as lack but as presence. Absence here is not what the novel tries to overcome; it is what the novel inhabits. Death, in Antoon's vision, is not merely a consequence of war. It is not a dramatic endpoint, nor simply the backdrop of history. It is a silencing force. It strips bodies not only of life but of voice, narrative, and legibility. In this quiet devastation, Jawad's sparse monologue emerges not as answer but as ethical residue. His voice becomes the novel's fragile center, not because it explains, but because it listens. It does not speak for the dead, only to them, and sometimes barely that: "I cannot wake up from this endless nightmare of wakefulness," he says, "Some people go to work behind a desk... My desk is the bench of death" (Antoon 180). There is no flourish here, only a quiet, unrelenting intimacy with loss.

The corpses Jawad tends to do not speak. They cannot. This silence is not incidental; it is structural. It is political. As Judith Butler reminds us in

Precarious Life, the right to be grieved is not evenly distributed. "The differential allocation of grievability," she writes, "operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human" (32–33). In Antoon's Iraq, the ungrievable are everywhere: unnamed, unclaimed, annihilated twice, first by violence and then by the refusal of mourning. "I have no idea who he is," a man says, handing Jawad a death certificate marked only anonymous (Antoon 239). The bodies accumulate, stripped of biography. Their silence is not emptiness; it is refusal, a mark of how far the state has fallen into necropolitical abstraction.

And yet Antoon does not seek to fill this silence with story. He does not offer voice where voice has been erased. Instead, he lets Jawad listen—not to meaning, but to loss, to the faint hum of care in a world where care has become unspeakable. "Every time I wash a corpse," Jawad confesses, "I feel as if a little part of me has died" (92). His work becomes something more than labor. It is a mourning ritual performed without illusion, without the promise of resurrection or repair. It is not about recovering what was lost but about touching what remains.

Antoon's language follows suit. His prose is spare, lyrical without ornament. Sentences do not crescendo; they recede. The text is full of pause, of breath. Dream sequences interrupt chronology, and descriptions, when they come, are half-lit and oblique. A quiet dream of Reem, standing in a pomegranate orchard: "I walk toward her and call out her name, but I can hear neither my own voice nor the sound of my footsteps. All I hear is the wind rustling. Reem smiles without saying anything" (225). The lyricism here is not decorative; it resists conclusion. Meaning flickers, then fades. What matters is not what Reem says, for she says nothing, but the fact that she stands there at all, that she is not forgotten.

Such restraint places *The Corpse Washer* in direct contrast to the dominant aesthetic of Western war narratives, where violence often arrives as spectacle. There, the suffering of Iraqis is framed for foreign eyes, staged as proof of moral collapse or as justification for imperial "intervention." Photographs of children, stories of bombings, bodies rendered visible only so they might be claimed rhetorically by Western grief (Yamada et al.; Naser et al.). Even in the literature of war, Iraqis appear as backdrop or collateral to American trauma. Their deaths serve a function, not in mourning but in narrative tension and moral catharsis.

Antoon refuses this logic. He refuses spectacle. The bodies in *The Corpse Washer* are not props. They are not devices. They are heavy, ambiguous, not always known, and never fully explained. "Bodies whose names had been stolen by violence," Jawad calls them (91). Their opacity is sacred. Their silence is not absence; it is protection from appropriation.

This, perhaps, is the clearest articulation of the novel's necropoetic ethics: to dwell within silence, not to break it. To witness, not to possess. Jawad's voice does not rise to the level of testimony. It falters. It withdraws. "I want to rid my body of this filth," he admits, "and escape from this profession and everything it drags behind it, but I can't" (157). His mourning does not resolve. It does not purify. It continues. And in that continuation, in the repetition of washing, in the refusal of closure, Antoon crafts a literature that resists the machinery of history and its brutal simplifications.

There is no monument here, no heroism. Only Jawad, quietly tending to the unnamed. Only his hands, carrying out the work no one else will do. This is mourning without mastery, art without triumph. And it is, in its way, a radical gesture.

To write under the sign of necropoetics, as Antoon does, is to refuse the promise of recovery. It is to write in the key of aftermath. To make of silence not an absence to be filled but a presence to be honored, a place where the dead are not erased but also not spoken for. They are washed, wrapped, remembered not in language but in gesture.

And sometimes, that is all literature can offer. And it is enough.

5. Necropoetics in Iraqi Fiction: A Comparative Study

To further trace the necropoetic contours of *The Corpse Washer*, it is illuminating to read Sinan Antoon's elegiac novel alongside another haunting artifact of post-invasion Iraqi literature: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013). Though markedly distinct in tone, genre, and narrative architecture—Saadawi embracing magical realism and absurdist allegory, Antoon remaining grounded in lyrical restraint—both works center the corpse as a charged figure, one through which the trauma of modern Iraq is felt, imagined, and confronted. Their shared obsession with the dead, and with how the dead are treated, remembered, or forgotten, marks each novel as a kind of aesthetic intervention into the necropolitical crisis of post-2003 Iraq.

Saadawi's creature, the "Whatsitsname," is perhaps the more overtly symbolic of the two. A stitched-together body composed of dismembered victims, the Whatsitsname rises from Baghdad's debris not merely as a monster but as a retributionist, a wanderer, a reflection. His body, assembled from the wreckage of sectarian violence, becomes a walking indictment: a being that kills in the name of justice, and yet remains uncertain of its own moral coordinates. "It is both victim and perpetrator, martyr and avenger." In this figure, Saadawi gives voice to the silenced dead literally. He imagines the corpse not as stillness but as motion, not as absence but as agency. The Whatsitsname speaks, acts, insists on justice

where the state has failed, where courts and clerics and commanders have long since abdicated their authority. As scholars have noted, this grotesque assemblage becomes more than monster; it becomes metaphor for national dismemberment, a grotesque body standing in for a fractured people (Alhashmi et al.).

Antoon's vision moves in the opposite direction. Where Saadawi turns the corpse into allegory, Antoon returns it to its most fragile materiality. His dead do not walk or speak. They lie still, anonymous, ruined. Jawad does not reanimate the body; he prepares it. He does not deliver justice; he offers care. His work is slow, repetitive, private, an art of hands and soap, not vengeance. "I feel as if a little part of me has died," Jawad says after each washing (Antoon 92). His mourning is not political in the loud, declarative sense. It is ethical, embodied. It accumulates in gestures, in rituals that barely hold together against the noise of war.

And yet both novels converge, uneasily, on the same ground: the corpse as contested site, the body as bearer of memory, the dead as figures through which the living struggle to narrate meaning. The Whatsitsname, stitched from victims of every sectarian group, literalizes the communal fragmentation that defines contemporary Iraqi identity. Its grotesqueness is a form of exposure: laying bare the incoherence, the guilt, the circular violence that infects the nation's sense of self. In contrast, the mutilated bodies Jawad tends to are not symbols; they are burdens. They arrive broken, nameless, and yet demand the same attentiveness as the sculptor once gave to clay. In both novels, the corpse interrupts abstraction. It asks to be looked at, not passed over.

The aesthetic modes through which these necropoetic interventions unfold are, of course, radically different. Saadawi's magical realism bends

genre toward excess, where horror bleeds into satire, where narrative logic is undone by the surreal, where justice becomes farce, then parable. His novel explodes outward, creating space for allegorical layering, for the monster as mirror of moral chaos. Antoon, by contrast, compresses. His prose is muted, stripped of ornament. It listens rather than proclaims. It does not allegorize death; it stays with it. The soap, the cloth, the warm water—these are his materials. His resistance is not in the realm of plot but in the refusal to sensationalize. Even his dreams resist drama, unfolding like bruises: dark, quiet, slow to fade.

What connects these two novels, finally, is not genre but attention. Both refuse to look away. Both ask how literature might respond when state and society have rendered death banal. Saadawi answers with voice, with a body that speaks for the silenced. Antoon answers with silence, with a body tendered, tended to, mourned without spectacle. One enacts the corpse's revolt; the other, its ritual dignity.

If *Frankenstein in Baghdad* asks what justice might look like in a world where all systems of order have collapsed, *The Corpse Washer* asks how mourning itself might be an act of justice. Not justice as restoration, not even justice as truth, but justice as refusal: to forget, to flatten, to walk past the dead as if they were already gone.

Together, these novels sketch the edges of a necropoetic tradition: one not defined by genre or technique, but by an ethic, to remain with the body, however broken, to shape from the ruins not coherence but care.

6. Conclusion

This study has unfolded necropoetics not as a fixed methodology but as a sensibility: a way of reading that lingers, that listens, that touches the silence literature often skirts. Through the steady, elegiac rhythms of *The Corpse Washer*, we have traced how Sinan Antoon reimagines death not

as spectacle or statistic, but as a space of ethical labor and aesthetic return. Antoon's novel does not seek to explain death, or even to narrate it fully. Instead, it asks what remains after death has done its work, and who remains to care for what is left behind.

By extending Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics into the literary domain, this study has argued that Antoon's work marks a shift from death as domination to death as an unfinished scene of resistance. Jawad's transformation, from sculptor of living forms to washer of the dead, destabilizes the boundaries between art and mourning, between creation and care. In his hands, the corpse is not symbolic, nor abstract. It is heavy. It resists interpretation. It must be washed, wrapped, prepared. And in this ritual labor—repetitive, intimate, devastatingly quiet—Antoon locates a counter-practice to the erasures of nationalism, militarism, and global narrative consumption. This is not memorialization as monument; it is memory as touch.

Antoon's prose style, minimal and lyrical, mirrors this ethic. His sentences do not climb toward climax; they pause, they break, they fall back. Silence in this novel is not absence but attention. Where Western war literature often builds toward revelation or redemption, *The Corpse Washer* retracts. It refuses to aestheticize suffering even as it renders it with aching precision. Its resistance is not dramatic but tender.

Juxtaposed with Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Antoon's novel draws out the full range of necropoetic expression. If Saadawi's stitched-together creature speaks and roams and indicts, Jawad's corpses lie still. If Saadawi gives voice to the dismembered, Antoon listens to what cannot be spoken. Together, the two novels do not resolve Iraq's post-

occupation trauma. They offer something stranger, more urgent: different grammars of the dead.

And yet the question remains: Can art, in facing the machinery of necropolitics, ever fully escape its orbit? Can the act of writing about death avoid becoming its echo? *The Corpse Washer* offers no easy consolation. It does not claim to redeem, or repair, or even to testify in the familiar sense. What it does offer is care, repetition, a hand on a ruined body, a whispered prayer, an unfinished sculpture. In its refusal to monumentalize, Antoon's novel reveals the radical potential of attention: of mourning without mastery, of remembering without illusion.

Perhaps this is where necropoetics leads us, not to resolution, but to a way of being-with. A literature not of closure but of keeping company with the dead. *The Corpse Washer* writes from within that company. And in doing so, it does not speak for the dead; it refuses to let them vanish unheld.

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